WILD and WOOLLY WORDS

LEA TASSIE

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by

Lea Tassie

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If the English language made any sense, lackadaisical would have something to do with a shortage of flowers. (Doug Larson)

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1 – Wild and Woolly

wild

The word "wild" describes a natural state, such as an uncultivated or uninhabited region, or an animal that hasn't been domesticated. It can also indicate strong passion, or something excellent or unusual. For example, "The music they play is just wild." The implication is that being wild means being untamed, uncontrolled, stormy, extravagant, or fantastic.

Now, I will concede that it's difficult to think of a word as being feral, but some of them are certainly "excellent" or "unusual." Some are even "fantastic."

The longest word in English is "pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis," which has 45 letters and refers to a lung disease caused by inhaling very fine silica dust. That's impressive but probably impossible to pronounce without a medical degree.

There's also "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," which has 34 letters and was used in the *Mary Poppins* film and musical. It's a cute nonsense word but I've never bothered to memorize it because there are so few occasions when it would be appropriate.

Finally, we have "antidisestablishmentarianism," with 28 letters, which I can say if I take a deep breath and concentrate very hard. However, *Wikipedia* tells me that not all dictionaries accept it because of lack of use.

No kidding!

woolly

"Woolly" is an adjective meaning made of wool, or covered with wool. In Australia and New Zealand, it's a noun meaning a sheep. Figuratively, it means vague or confused in expression or character, as in "woolly thinking."

The word is correctly spelled as either "wooly" or "woolly." The last spelling is used in such phrases as woolly rhinoceros, woolly mammoth, and woolly thistle.

wild and woolly

"Wild and woolly" means very wild, without order or control, or rough in appearance or behavior. Synonyms include violent, boisterous, rowdy, raucous, exciting, and crazy.

The phrase comes from the Wild West in America from the 1850s, popularized by a book title, Adair Welcker's *Tales of the "Wild and Woolly West,"* published in 1891. A publisher's note on the book said "wild and woolly" referred to the rough sheepskin coats worn by cowboys and farmers and was a cowboy's expression for a genuine cowboy. Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) stated, "I'm wild, and woolly and full of fleas," which was later picked up in the cowboy ditty, *Pecos Bill and the Wilful Coyote* (ca. 1932) by W. C. White: "Oh, I'm wild and woolly and full of fleas, Ain't never been curried below the knees."

wool

"Wool" is the dense, soft, often curly hair forming the coats of sheep and certain other mammals, such as goats, rabbit, and alpaca. It is highly valued as a textile fiber. The word is also used to describe fabric or yarn made of this hair and can be applied to the hairy or downy material on a plant or animal, as on certain caterpillars.

The term may also refer to inorganic materials, such as mineral wool and glass wool, that have some properties similar to animal wool.

dyed-in-the-wool

"Dyed-in-the-wool" means thorough, permanent, or firmly established, such as in one's opinions or beliefs. For example, "Mr. Campbell has made Hong Kong his home for the past 38 years but he remains a dyed-in-the-wool Scotsman."

The term, which dates from at least the sixteenth century, alludes to cloth made from wool that was dyed while raw (before it was spun) instead of being dyed piece by piece. This meant that color was more evenly distributed in the wool, and lasted longer. This concept was transferred to other kinds of genuineness. It has been a cliché since the early 1900s.

wrap someone in cotton wool

To "wrap someone in cotton wool" is to be over-protective, or to coddle.

slut's wool

"Slut's wool" means puffs or clusters of dirt and dust.

Chaucer uses "sluttish" (late 14th century) in reference to the appearance of an untidy man. In the mid-15th century, slut also came to mean "a kitchen maid or a scullery drudge." By the 18th century, hard pieces in a bread loaf from imperfect kneading were called slut's pennies, and dust left to gather on a floor was slut's wool.

Have you looked under the bed lately?

wool-gathering

If you're "wool-gathering," you're indulging in idle daydreaming.

The term once literally referred to the act of gathering loose tufts of wool that had gotten caught on bushes and fences as sheep passed by. It was not the most profitable of enterprises; its practitioners must have seemed to wander aimlessly, gaining little for their efforts. In the mid-16th century, woolgathering began to appear in figurative phrases such as "my wits went a woolgathering." In other words, "my mind went wandering aimlessly." From there, it wasn't long before the word woolgathering came to suggest foolish or purposeless mind-wandering.

But surely daydreaming is relaxation for the brain.

call of the wild

The "call of the wild" is an intense yearning to explore, experience, or be immersed in nature, especially in its most primal and undomesticated state.

This phrase was made popular by a novel named *Call of the Wild*, published by Jack London in the year 1903. It originates from earlier than that, according to historians, but there is no literary proof.

The *Call of the Wild* is set in Yukon, Canada, during the 1890s Klondike Gold Rush, when strong sled dogs were in high demand. The central character of the novel is a dog named Buck. The story opens at a ranch in Santa Clara Valley, California, when Buck is stolen from his home and sold into service

as a sled dog in Alaska. He becomes progressively more primitive and wild in the harsh environment, where he is forced to fight to survive and to dominate other dogs. By the end, he sheds the veneer of civilization, and relies on primordial instinct and learned experience to emerge as a leader in the wild.

London spent about a year in Yukon, and his observations form much of the material for the book. The story was serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* in the summer of 1903 and was published later that year in book form. The book's great popularity and success made a reputation cinematic adaptations.

London's story is a tale of survival and a return to primitivism. A critic writes that, "the strong, the shrewd, and the cunning shall prevail when … life is bestial." The theme is based on Darwin's concept of the survival of the fittest.

London also explores the idea of "nature vs. nurture." Buck, raised as a pet, is by heredity a wolf. The change of environment brings out his innate characteristics and strengths to the point where he fights for survival and becomes the leader of the pack. Buck evolves to the point that he is ready to join a wolf pack, which has a social structure uniquely adapted to and successful in the harsh Arctic environment, unlike humans, who are weak in the harsh environment.

2 – Animals

get back in the saddle

To "get back in the saddle " is to resume something after an absence. Though this phrase is rarely used in reference to riding horses, that's probably the source. If you fall off your horse, or get bucked off, the idea is to get back in the saddle right away, before fear has a chance to inhibit you. That applies to any endeavor.

Back in the Saddle Again was the signature song of American cowboy entertainer Gene Autry, first released in 1939. Members of the *Western Writers of America* chose it as fifth of the Top 100 Western songs of all time.

back the wrong horse

Originally, backing the wrong horse meant betting money — and losing it — on a racehorse that didn't win. It still means that, of course, but now it has been generalized to apply to making wrong decisions or supporting a person or action that is later unsuccessful. It's often used in politics.

One of the earliest recorded instances of "backing the wrong horse" can be found in the work of the English playwright and author Richard Brinsley Sheridan in 1775.

horsepower

One "horsepower" is a unit of measurement of power, or the rate at which work is done, usually in reference to the output of engines. Technically, one horsepower is a unit of power equal to 745.7 watts or 33,000 foot-pounds per minute.

The term was adopted in the late 1700s by Scottish engineer James Watt to compare the output of steam engines with the power of draft horses. It was later expanded to include the output power of other types of engines. We are also reminded of James Watt when we talk about 60-watt light bulbs.

So, imagine a draft horse raising coal out of a coal mine. An average horse exerting one horsepower can theoretically raise 33,000 pounds of coal one

foot in a minute, or 33 pounds of coal 1,000 feet in one minute. Now imagine how much coal your 500 horsepower V8 engine could raise in a minute!

beard the lion

To "beard the lion" is to confront risk or danger head on, especially for the sake of possible personal gain. The phrase refers to a proverb based on a Bible story, in which a shepherd hunts down a lion that stole a lamb, grasps it by the beard, and kills it.

Okaaaay.

slide in on a shrimp sandwich

The term "slide in on a shrimp sandwich" comes from a Swedish phrase meaning "when someone hasn't had to work to get where they are." This could be for all sorts of reasons, from nepotism, to being very friendly with the boss, to simply being in the right place at the right time.

Shrimp is a popular food and food is a popular source of idioms. In English, you can be the apple of one's eye, be the big cheese, and bring home the bacon. The list goes on and on. A common thread among these idioms is the association between food and wealth. The deeper your pockets, the more you can eat, and the fancier the food, the higher your implied status is. For most people, shrimp is an expensive food, so this idiom works well.

a sheep in tiger's skin

A "sheep in tiger's skin" is used to describe someone who impressive in appearance, but lacking in substance. The phrase arises from Chinese culture, where the tiger is the king of all non-mythical animals.

make sheep's eyes

If you "make sheep's eyes" at someone, you give them adoring or amorous looks. This phrase probably arose because sheep's eyes appear big and gentle. It's been around since roughly 1500.

Neptune's sheep

"Neptune's sheep" refers to the white foam on waves, likened to the fluffy white wool on sheep. In Roman mythology, Neptune is the god of water. The sea is his domain.

separate the sheep from the goats

To "separate the sheep from the goats" is to distinguish between good and bad individuals, or superior and inferior ones. For example, "In a civil war where both sides commit atrocities, you can't separate the sheep from the goats."

This term refers to the prophecy in Matthew in the New Testament that the sheep (that is, the compassionate) will sit on God's right hand (and find salvation), and the goats (the hard-hearted) will sit on the left (and be sent to damnation).

Both sheep and goats were valuable farm animals in ancient Palestine. Common Christian imagery of the time portrays them in very different lights. Sheep are depicted as the meek and gentle followers of Christ (the Lamb of God) and goats as unruly and coarse outcasts, castigated as scapegoats and widely used as the basis of portraits of Satan.

rat race

The "rat race" is an American expression meaning fierce competition for success, wealth, or power. It can also be a busy, tiring routine. In some cases, it could be both. For example, "You may not realize what a rat race it is to get research grants."

The image most people visualize behind the expression "rat race" is a group of laboratory rats racing through a maze in order to be the first one to obtain a goal, usually food. The rats are at the mercy of the experimenter and the degree of difficulty designed into the maze. However, the literal origin of "rat race" is from the early 1800s and describes the decorating of actual rats with ribbons to tell them apart when they ran a race that spectators gambled on.

Another use of the term occurred in the 1930s, to refer to aviation training that consisted of fighter planes doing a follow-the-leader type of exercise, according to the magazine *Popular Science* in May of 1941.

By 1900, though, the term had already taken on a derogatory meaning when applied to fierce competition to maintain or improve one's position in the workplace or social life.

rat out

"Rat out" is slang, meaning to quit something or to tattle on someone.

beetle off

"Beetle off" is an informal British phrase which means to leave quickly or suddenly. If you've ever seen how fast beetles move when they are frightened, you'll get the connection.

till the cows come home

One of the older cow-based expressions, "till the cows come home," is likely based on the late (or early) hour when cows in the field return to the barn to get milked. Alternate theories point to locales where cattle are sent to pasture in the summer and then brought back in the autumn. Either way, the expression has evolved to mean "an indeterminately long time, possibly forever."

The Oxford English Dictionary points to its first printed use in 1610 by Shakespeare contemporary Alexander Cooke: "Drinking, eating, feasting, and revelling, till the cows came home, as the saying is." The image is of a herd of cows very slowly meandering through a pasture to their barn. Cows generally are never in a hurry.

fly on the wall

To be a "fly on the wall" is to observe something closely while you remain unseen and refrain from interfering in the situation.

This American phrase originated in the 1920s. Here is a sample from *The Oakland Tribune*, February 1921: "I'd just love to be a fly on the wall when the Right Man comes along."

It is now often used in relation to 'fly on the wall documentaries,' which are films of real life situations supposedly made without affecting the behavior of the participants. It is highly unlikely that the behavior is unaffected. After all, are you going to pick your nose if there's a camera trained on you?

snake in the grass

The idiom "a snake in the grass" is used to describe an underhanded, stealthily treacherous individual who may not have seemed that way at first. It's sort of along the same lines as a wolf in sheep's clothing.

This metaphor for treachery was used in 37 BCE by the Roman poet Virgil. Snakes have been feared and hated since we lived in caves, and the metaphor has remained both vivid and current.

rabbit's foot

In some cultures, a "rabbit's foot" is carried as an amulet believed to bring good luck. This belief has existed for centuries in many parts of the world. In variations of this superstition, the rabbit it came from must have been killed in a particular place, or by using a particular method, or by a person possessing particular attributes (for example, by a cross-eyed man).

There are other strictures attached to the charm which are now observed mostly in the breach, namely that it must be the left hind foot of a rabbit which was shot or otherwise captured in a cemetery. Some sources say that the rabbit must be taken by the full moon, and others specify the new moon. Some say instead that the rabbit must be taken on a Friday, or a rainy Friday, or Friday the 13th. Some say that the rabbit should be shot with a silver bullet, while others say that the foot must be cut off while the rabbit is still alive.

Humorist R. E. Shay is credited with the witticism, "Depend on the rabbit's foot if you will, but remember it didn't work for the rabbit."

black cat

A common superstition is to believe that owning a "black cat" or even seeing a black cat brings bad luck. Sadly, because of their association with bad luck, black cats are only half as likely to be adopted as cats of other colors.

However, black cats weren't always regarded as bad luck. In fact, as early as 3000 BCE, black cats were worshipped in Egypt and were thought to bring good luck. Cats of all colors enjoyed the good life in ancient Egypt, where killing a cat came with a swift death sentence. A few millennia later, pagan customs and traditions were being overthrown by Christianity, which was spreading throughout Europe. This included vilifying any person or creature related to a pagan religion, such as the Roman goddess Diana, as well as the cat, which was a symbol of paganism, witchcraft and goddesses. So we can blame it all on religion.

Black cats have positive associations in the Celtic nations and Japanese folklore. Black cats were sacred in Celtic mythology. Scottish lore holds that a black cat's arrival at a new home signifies prosperity, while Welsh lore states that a black cat brings good health.

On the other hand, both the Gaels and Celtic Britons had traditions of feral and sometimes malevolent black cats. In Scottish mythology, a fairy known as the "Cat sìth" takes the form of a black cat, while in Welsh mythology the monstrous Cath Palug grew from a black kitten. In England, as with other Germanic cultures, some areas would associate black cats with witches and bad luck.

In the early days of TV in the US, many stations located on VHF channel 13 used a black cat as a mascot in order to make fun of being located on an "unlucky" channel number.

maverick

The word "maverick" means:
—a rebel, an independent person who refuses to adhere to the policies of a group to which he or she belongs.
—an unbranded range animal, especially a calf that has become separated from its mother, traditionally considered the property of the first person who brands it.

When a client gave lawyer Samuel A. Maverick 400 cattle to settle a $1,200 debt, the 19th-century south Texas man had no use for them, so he left the cattle unbranded and allowed them to roam freely. Neighboring stockmen seized the opportunity, branding and herding the stray cattle as their own. Maverick eventually recognized the folly of the situation and sold what was left of his depleted herd, but not before his name became synonymous with such unbranded livestock. By the end of the 1800s, the term maverick was being used to refer to individuals who prefer to blaze their own trails.

bull of the woods

Where I come from in the forests of British Columbia, "bull of the woods" means the foreman of a logging operation. It can also be used to describe someone who is the leader of a group or someone who is powerful, dominant, or influential in a particular area.

The origin of the phrase is unclear, but it is believed to have arisen in the US

in the 1800s. The phrase can also be associated with stubbornness and aggressiveness, as a bull is known for having both those attributes.

bull in a china shop

A "bull in a china shop" is someone who is clumsily destructive.

An early written example of the expression appeared in Frederick Marryat's 1834 novel, *Jacob Faithful*, although the image of a bull wrecking havoc as he wandered among tables and shelves of fine porcelain can be traced to a century earlier. The expression can also be found in several European languages, although the animal in question is an elephant rather than a bull.

In 1940, an American press agent led a bull through a New York City china shop as a publicity stunt. The bull didn't break anything, but a bystander trying to avoid the bull backed into a table and wrecked a few things.

take the bull by the horns

To "take the bull by the horns" means to confront a problem head-on, as in, "We'll have to take the bull by the horns and tackle the Medicare question."

The analogy to a matador who actually seizes a bull by the horns in order to wrestle it to the ground seems a little far-fetched but is often cited. A more likely origin is the barnyard, where a safely tethered bull could indeed be so grasped. The transfer to meeting other kinds of difficulty had taken place by 1800 or so. "It would never do to take the bull by the horns in that manner," warned John Galt (*The Provost*, 1822).

screw the pooch

To "screw the pooch" is vulgar slang meaning to make a big and humiliating or irreversible mistake, to cause something to fail. Screw the pooch is a euphemistic version of the expression "fuck the dog" (and sell the pups), which goes back to at least 1935.

Screw the pooch was popularized by the 1979 book-turned-movie, *The Right Stuff*, by Tom Wolfe. Based on the Mercury Seven space program of the 1960s, the book and the film both depict characters repeatedly using screw the pooch, an effort to use actual NASA jargon and slang of the day. Since then, screw the pooch has become a popular way to describe all sorts of flubs, errors, and embarrassments.

as sick as a dog

To be "as sick as a dog" is to feel very ill, particularly to feel nauseated. Despite being touted as man's best friend, dogs are often maligned. This proverbial simile dates from the 1500s or earlier and is still current. Occasionally it has appeared with "sick" meaning "tired of."

Many negative expressions about dogs exist, such as "tired as a dog," "dirty dog," "dog in the manger," "dog's breakfast," "go to the dogs," and more. Similar phrases, like "sick as a horse" and "sick as a cat," emerged later. "Sick as a parrot," a newer phrase from the 1970s, describes mental depression, not nausea.

The prize for creativity, though the result is puzzling, goes to Jonathan Swift. He came up with "sick as a cushion" in 1731.

barking dogs seldom bite

The proverb "barking dogs never bite" isn't really about dogs. It simply suggests that people who are loud and threatening don't back up their threats with action, and is used to express reassurance. "I know it's a scary situation, but barking dogs seldom bite."

People who make big threats usually don't carry them out. But sometimes they do. And sometimes, dogs who bark also bite.

This is an old English saying and one of the many proverbs that were collected by the Tudor courtier John Heywood in his glossary of proverbs, circa 1550.

mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun

The expression "mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun" refers to the perceived naivety of the English in their disregard for the power of the tropical sun. The song popularizing that line was written by Noel Coward in the 1930s.

The idea that only the English were crazy enough to go out at noon in hot countries began in the days of the Grand Tours of the 1700s. One Grand Tour traveler was the Georgian author, Charles Burney. In 1770 he wrote the travelogue *Music, Men and Manners* in France and Italy, which contains this

line: "He certainly over-heated himself at Venice by walking at a season when it is said that only Dogs and Englishmen are seen out of doors at noon, all else lie down in the middle of the day." This quote may have been the one to inspire Noel Coward.

The song is a masterpiece of comic rhyming. It's also very long, so I'll only quote a few lines.

At twelve noon
The natives swoon
And no further work is done.
But mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun.

the tail wagging the dog

"The tail wagging the dog" is an idiom that usually refers to something important or powerful being controlled by something less so. Its earliest use is in the 1858 play *Our American Cousin*. The 1997 film *Wag the Dog* shortened the phrase and added the additional meaning of "superfluous (military) action in order to distract from domestic scandal."

Sometimes words or phrases come into English from the world of film, as in "paparazzi," (the plural form of a word for a type of freelance photographer) taken from the name of a character in Fellini's 1959 film *La dolce vita*. Others have come from the world of theater, such as "malapropism" (a usually humorous misapplication of a word or phrase), from the name of a character in Richard Sheridan's 1775 play *The Rivals*. And others appear to have come from both media. An example of this is the idiom, "the tail wagging the dog."

Here's a quote from *The Union Democrat* (Manchester, NH), 12 May 1863:

"The answer to a riddle, 'Why does a dog wag his tail?' is answered by an English nobleman, who says it is 'because the dog is stronger than his tail. If he wasn't, the tail would wag the dog.' Sharp reasoning, that."

dog whistle

The earliest, and still most common, meaning of "dog whistle" is the obvious one: it is a whistle for dogs. Dog ears can detect much higher frequencies than our puny human ears can, so a dog whistle is nothing more than a very high-pitched whistle that canines can hear, but we cannot.

Yet there's another dog whistle, a coded message communicated through words or phrases commonly understood by a particular group of people, but

not by others. It is primarily used to describe political speech.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has a citation from a Canadian newspaper, *The Ottawa Citizen*, in October of 1995: "It's an all-purpose dog-whistle that those fed up with feminists, minorities, the undeserving poor hear loud and clear."

It was also used in 1947, in a book titled *American Economic History*. The reference was to a speech by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who is quoted as saying, "…designed to be like a modern dog-whistle, with a note so high that the sensitive farm ear would catch it perfectly while the unsympathetic East would hear nothing."

dog's dinner

When we describe something as a "dog's dinner," it means a poor piece of work, a mess or a muddle. It's often used to describe someone who is dressed in an ostentatiously smart manner. The image is of a dog's meal of jumbled-up scraps.

Examples of use:
"You can't attend the ball dressed like that! You look like a dog's dinner!"
"Oh no, I have made a right dog's dinner of this recipe."

The phrase is largely used in the UK, where it originated in the early 1900s, an adaptation of the earlier related phrase "a dog's breakfast." The dog's dinner version refers to someone whose dress is flashy and containing many colors and accessories.

the nature of the beast

"The nature of the beast" can refer to a basic inherent character trait in a person, or to an intrinsic aspect of a process or situation. It's often used in a negative way. For example, "You can get rich quick in the stock market or you can lose your shirt. That's the nature of the beast."

In this context, "beast" refers to a wild, untamed animal. The term carries connotations of power, instinct, and unpredictability.

The idiom first appeared in *Collection of English Proverbs* compiled by John Ray and published in 1678. It may be assumed that the phrase was used in a figurative sense before this time. It may also be assumed that it was originally used in a literal sense, before it became an idiom.

3 – Birds

a bird in a gilded cage

To be like "a bird in a gilded cage" is to live a life of wealth and luxury but without true freedom or contentment. "Because the movie star could not go out without being recognized and pursued, she stayed in her penthouse, living like a bird in a gilded cage."

not a dicky-bird

Once you know that "dicky-bird" is Cockney rhyming slang for "word," you've got the puzzle solved. A "dicky-bird" can mean either a word or a brief chat. "We've not heard a dicky-bird about a birthday party for him."

The term indirectly derives from the tweeting sounds made by the birds and dates from at least the 1700s. At that time, 'dickey-bird' was a generic nursery term for the small, chirruping birds often found in the English countryside and featured in the well-known nursery rhyme *Two Little Dicky Birds*.

> Two little dicky birds,
> Sitting on a wall;
> One named Peter,
> One named Paul.

The rhyme was adapted from the earlier *Two Little Blackbirds,* which was published in London in the first book of nursery rhymes, *Mother Goose's Melody*, circa 1765.

kill two birds with one stone

This phrase describes achieving two goals with a single effort.

The idea originates from Greek mythology when Daedalus killed two birds with one stone, seeking feathers to make wings for himself and for his son Icarus. They attempted to escape from Crete by flying out, but Icarus flew too close to the sun and the wax holding his wings together melted. Icarus fell to his death.

The precise expression dates from 1656, when Thomas Hobbes wrote in *The*

Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance, "T. H. thinks to kill two birds with one stone, and satisfy two arguments with one answer, whereas in truth he satisfieth neither."

The source would have to be mythology. Or can you imagine killing two birds by hurling a single rock?

duck soup

If you say an activity is "duck soup," you're saying that it's easy. "That math test was duck soup." This expression gained currency as the title of a hilarious popular movie by the Marx Brothers (1933).

double-yoked eggs

The chances are about one in 1,000 that the next egg you crack open will be "double-yolked." As is the case with many uncommon occurrences in nature, people have attached several superstitions to double-yolked eggs.

They have an obvious connection to fertility, so most of these superstitions have to do with reproduction and good fortune. The most common is that you or someone you know will soon become pregnant (maybe with twins) if you happen upon a double-yolker.

On the other hand, ancient Norse beliefs say that if you get a double-yolked egg — it means that someone in your family is about to die.

Double-yolk eggs happen when the chicken ovulates twice in quick succession. The yolk is released into the hen's oviduct before the previous yolk has had a chance to clear out of the way. So a single shell then forms around the two yolks.

Typically, double yolks happen in young hens with immature reproductive systems whose timing hasn't quite been perfected. It can also be a hereditary trait in heavier hen breeds. And sometimes, double-yolkers occur because of exposure to fake light.

Triple- and quadruple-yolk eggs exist too, although they're even rarer than double-yolkers. The world yolk record is nine in a single egg.

a little bird told me

If your friend, Jean, begins by saying "A little bird told me…," it means she's about to share news, perhaps a secret, but she doesn't want to divulge who told her about it.

Various authors over the centuries, including Shakespeare, have made reference to birds, feathered or otherwise, giving messages. Before the days of telephones and Wi-Fi, it would have been reasonable to imagine a bird, flying fast on a direct route, carrying messages.

chicken out

If you are too scared to do something and you decide to back out or cancel your plans, you are said to have chickened out. "I'm going to chicken out on the rollercoaster ride."

"Chicken" is a popular synonym for "cowardly," a usage arising in the 1600s and 1700s but then apparently abandoned until the 20th century.

The source of the phrase isn't known but one popular theory links the idiom to cockfighting, a brutal sport where two roosters fight until one is killed or severely injured. The rooster that loses or retreats is often referred to as a "chicken," implying cowardice or weakness. This metaphor was extended to humans, describing those who withdraw from challenges out of fear.

I don't care where the phrase originated; I'm not getting on that rollercoaster!

the early bird gets the worm

The proverb "the early bird catches the worm" suggests that if you wake up and get to work early, you will succeed. "She's always the first one in line and does well at these auctions—the early bird catches the worm!"

This saying, first recorded in English in 1605, is so familiar that it is often shortened to "early bird," a term also used in the sense of "early riser," as in, "You can call me at seven. I'm an early bird."

You might also be an early diner. Restaurants often have "early-bird specials" at lower prices, so those who get there first have the best chance of finding a table. Similarly, early registration for conferences or hotels, purchases of tickets for air travel, concerts, and other events feature lower prices.

This saying is first recorded in John Ray's *A collection of English proverbs* (1670). If it was considered a proverb then, it had obviously been around for

quite a while.

fly the coop

To "fly the coop" means to run away. "After years of fighting with my mother, my father finally flew the coop."

This term originally meant "escape from jail," known as the coop in underworld slang since the late 1700s. This expression, with its analogy to barnyard fowl escaping from a chicken coop or other enclosure, is American in origin and dates from about 1900.

When a chicken is accused of having flown the coop, it means that the chicken is now flying or roaming free. Figuratively, we use "fly the coop" to mean "to leave suddenly or secretly," or "to escape or go away," or "to leave home."

pecking order

"Pecking order" refers to the basic pattern of social organization within a flock of poultry in which each bird pecks another lower in the scale without fear of retaliation and submits to pecking by one of higher rank. Chickens thus establish rank within their flock by pecking one another. The phrase is also sometimes used of other, non-pecking animals such as horses. As an idiom, "pecking order" among humans refers to a social hierarchy (though usually without the pecking).

The expression originated from a Norwegian zoologist's 1921 PhD dissertation on the behavior of chickens.

The first usage in English is from K. C. Creasy's translation of Alverdes' *Social Life in Animal World* (1927): "Such 'pecking orders' give the society concerned a certain degree of organization."

don't put all your eggs in one basket

To "put all your eggs in one basket" is to risk all you have on the success or failure of one thing. This idiom apparently comes from the idea that, when collecting eggs from your hens, should you put them all in one basket and then drop that basket, every single egg would break.

The solution, according to one website is to divide them among a few

different baskets. But that's carrying the analogy too far. Suppose you usually collect a dozen eggs from your hens each morning. How easy will it be to carry a dozen baskets?

However, the phrase is usually applied to investing, or to the many activities which benefit from variety. For example, "We believe mixed farming is the best option for our operation. We don't like having all our eggs in one basket. For years, cattle were not overly profitable … but beef cattle, in particular Angus, have been extremely profitable over the past five years." (Louise Mann, *The Weekly Times (Australia) Online*, 18 May 2023)

walk on eggshells

To "walk on eggshells" means to exercise extreme caution. The extended use apparently comes from the fact that eggshells are fragile and break easily. It would take an impossibly light step not to break them. The phrase is used especially about acting carefully around someone who may be easily upset.

"I had to walk on eggshells around my mother when she was in one of her moods."

mother hen

A "mother hen" is a person, male or female, who assumes an overly protective maternal attitude. When a hen is hatching eggs and raising young chicks, she sits on them physically, protecting them from harm. A hen will continue to keep her chicks close by for several weeks, guiding them to eat the right foods and stay away from danger.

An example would be a mother who justifies her mother-hen action as being in her daughter's best interest—coming up with excuses to vet her daughter's roommate or staying too long in her daughter's dorm room under the guise of helping her move in. This is also known as "helicopter parenting." I suppose a fat hen struggling to fly up to the top roost has some resemblance to a helicopter.

no spring chicken

The phrase "no spring chicken" is used to describe people who are no longer young but may behave as though they were.

In the natural course of events, spring is when birds, including barnyard

chickens, nest and hatch their young. Thus, spring is when the youngest chickens are around.

This unflattering expression, often applied to women, has been used since the early 1700s.

rule the roost

To "rule the roost" means to be in charge, to boss others, as in, "Our Mama is tough as an old shoe and rules the roost without saying a word."

This expression originated in the 1400s as "rule the roast," which was either a corruption of rooster or alluded to the person who was in charge of the roast and thus boss in the kitchen. In the barnyard, a rooster decides which hen should roost near him. Both interpretations persisted for 200 years. Thomas Heywood (c. 1630), in his *History of Women*, put it as "Her that ruled the roast in the kitchen," but Shakespeare had it in *Henry VI* as: "The new-made duke that rules the roast." In the mid-1700s, roost began to compete with roast and, in the 1900s, roost displaced roast altogether.

In any event, the phrase has been used for bossing anything from a family to an entire nation.

A "roost" is a support (such as a bar or tree branch) on which birds rest and can also refer to the building which contains the roosts and where chickens spend the dark hours.

night owl

This colloquial term, "night owl," was originally used in the late 1500s for owls, which are active at night. In the mid-1800s, it began to be applied to nocturnal human beings.

Though staying up after dark used to be considered a negative trait, this changed in 17th and 18th century Europe (and subsequently spread beyond) due to the development and implementation of artificial lighting, including street lighting. The introduction of chocolate, coffee, and tea, and cafes that stayed open through dawn, all aids to staying awake, became part of the new culture.

dead as a dodo

If you're "dead as a dodo," you are undoubtedly and unquestionably dead. The phrase is often used for objects, for example: "Well, the car battery is as dead as a dodo."

The dodo was a large flightless bird that lived on the islands of Mauritius and Réunion. It became extinct in the late 1600s as a result of hunting and the destruction of its nests by pigs belonging to settlers on the islands.

The name "dodo" comes from Portuguese *duodo* meaning 'simpleton.' It was applied to the large flightless bird of Mauritius because the bird had no fear of man and so was easily killed, being quickly wiped out by visiting European sailors. The dodo's fate has made it proverbial for something that is long dead and the name has been used metaphorically for an old-fashioned, stupid, or unenlightened person since the 1800s.

There are no precise pictorial records of live dodos and paintings of them date from after 1662. Discoveries of skeletal remains of the birds have enabled biologists to reconstruct their form, which is now thought to be somewhat more slender then the familiar representations.

Lewis Carroll used the Dodo as a character in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* 1865, and it was the popularity of this book that led to the widespread use of the phrase 'as dead as a dodo.'

4 – Armed and Dangerous

gun

A gun is a weapon, described by one dictionary as "a piece of ordnance usually with high muzzle velocity and comparatively flat trajectory." It can be relatively small and portable, like a rifle or a handgun, or big, like a cannon.

As a noun, gun is also used to mean:
—a hunter
—a hired gunman, a bodyguard, an assassin, or member of a criminal gang
—an arm's large bicep: "He wears tank tops to show off his guns."
—an important, successful, or influential person, a leader: "a big gun"

As a verb, it can mean:
—to fire on
—to shoot: "gunned down by a hit man"
—of a vehicle, to increase speed rapidly; "gun the engine"

The word "gun," which can be traced to the 1300s, is likely a shortening of the name "Gunilda." A ballista (a large missile-thrower in the form of a crossbow) that was used to defend Windsor Castle in the 1300s was named *Domina Gunilda*, or "Lady Gunilda." Gunilda is an Old Norse name meaning "battle." We don't know whether the English learned the name from Norsemen, or if its use was a coincidence. There are other examples of a similar use of the name. *Gonnylyde* was the name of a cannon in a 1300s song.

gun-shy

The term "gun-shy" is an adjective that first came into use in the mid-1800s to describe hunting dogs which became alarmed or retreated at the loud sound of gunfire. The term is still used in this manner today, but has also taken on a larger, figurative meaning to describe some person or animal that is nervous and apprehensive for other reasons.

Gun-shy implies that someone who has been alarmed in a certain situation in the past is now nervous when confronting a similar situation. For example, "She's still gun-shy about new relationships."

This idiom dates from the late 1800s.

under the gun

If you're feeling "under the gun," you're worried because you have to do something by a particular time or in a particular way. You're facing pressure to perform.

This idiom alludes to a gun being pointed at a person to force him or her to act. It's also a term used in the game of poker.

young gun

A "young gun" is an up-and-coming young man, especially one considered as being assertive and confident.

A young gun was, in 1822, a small pistol. By 1840, it meant a young, inexperienced shooter. By 1929, it had acquired its current figurative meaning of a young person who is successful or expected to be successful.

Quaker Puffed Rice and Puffed Wheat cereals, introduced in 1904, were marketed as being "shot from guns." This was actually true. The grains were loaded into cannon-like cylinders, subjected to high heat, and propelled with a big bang. Until the cereals were discontinued in 2019, the explosive "Shot from Guns" tagline helped popularize them among generations of young-gun breakfast-eaters.

at gunpoint

Literally, "at gunpoint" means being in the position of having a gun pointed at one, as in an armed robbery. For example, "They forced us out of the car at gunpoint."

Figuratively, "at gunpoint" means being put under extreme pressure or aggressively coerced.

big gun

A "big gun" in literal terms, is a large artillery gun or one of the largest-caliber naval guns (as on a battleship). Cannons used to be referred to as 'big guns' or 'great guns,' while rifles or muskets were called 'small guns.'

Figuratively, however, a big gun is a very important and powerful person in an organization or area of activity. For example, "He's a pretty big gun in Canadian politics." Synonyms include: top banana, big cheese, kingpin, boss, big enchilada, kahuna, bigwig, and big shot.

"Big shot" was added to the arsenal of American English in the early 20th century as a term for a person of consequence or prominence, and in the 1920s and 1930s, it came into vogue as a nickname for notorious criminals.

"Big gun" originated as a synonym of centuries-old "great gun," the name for a piece of heavy artillery that, in the 17th century, also came to be used in figurative contexts to denote people who, like the gun, made an impact.

One might speculate that big shot is a blend of big gun and great shot, but we can't be sure that hits the mark.

go great guns

To "go great guns" is to go fast or successfully, with unremitting vigor or energy. For example, "They're going great guns with those drawings." The phrase "great guns" can also be used as an expletive to express surprise. For example, "Great guns! You're not leaving now?"

The expression comes from British naval slang of the late 1700s, when "blowing great guns" meant a violent gale.

gun down

"Gun down" means to shoot someone with a gun, especially when killing or seriously injuring that person. It's implied that the person can't defend himself or herself.

gun for

The phrase "gun for" can be used in a number of ways:
—attempt to shoot someone or something with a gun
—plan or take action to harm or destroy (someone)
—work hard in pursuit of a goal: "gun for a promotion"
—search for in order to reprimand: "The boss is gunning for you."
—supplant someone by aggressive or underhanded means
—bring someone to justice: "Police are gunning for the escaped convict."
—move with great speed and energy: "I gunned for the exit."

—show support for someone: "We're all gunning for her on this exam."

hold a gun to someone's head

To "hold a gun to someone's head" means to force that person to do something by using threats.

gun it

To "gun it" means to accelerate or speed up quickly or suddenly. This is usually said in reference to a vehicle.

gun moll

A gun moll or gangster moll or gangster's moll is the female companion of a male professional criminal. She may be a criminal herself. "Gun" was British slang for thief, derived from Yiddish *gnef*.

gunboat diplomacy

"Gunboat diplomacy" describes foreign policy that is supported by the use or threat of naval power, implying a direct threat of warfare should terms not be agreeable to the superior force. A gunboat was a relatively small ship which could navigate through shallow waters. Easy to maneuver, the boats were fitted with heavy weapons.

The term "gunboat diplomacy" comes from the nineteenth-century period of imperialism, when Western powers would intimidate less powerful entities into granting concessions through a demonstration of Western superior military capabilities, usually represented by their naval assets. A coastal country negotiating with a Western power would notice that a warship or fleet of ships had appeared off its coast. The mere sight of such power almost always had a considerable effect, and it was rarely necessary for such boats to demonstrate their firepower.

Land-based equivalents include military mobilization (as in Europe in the summer of 1914), the massing of threatening bodies of troops near international borders (as practiced by the German Reich in central Europe in the 1940s), or appropriately timed and situated military maneuvers ("exercises").

In 1854, Japan and the United States signed the Treaty of Kanagawa, opening up trade between the two nations for the first time in 200 years. The agreement came about after Commodore Matthew Perry led a naval squadron to Tokyo Bay.

President Theodore Roosevelt is often credited with expanding America's use of gunboat diplomacy. Roosevelt famously said that his diplomatic motto was to "speak softly and carry a big stick," which meant that the nation had to be ready to back up words with force. In order to show off America's naval power, Roosevelt sent a naval fleet around the world, on a tour which lasted 14 months. The fleet was known as the Great White Fleet (its ships were painted white, instead of the usual gray), and consisted of 16 battleships manned by 14,000 sailors.

The US has never completely abandoned the show of force. In 2011, the *New York Times* summed up the Obama administration's activities in Asia: "The Obama administration has been an active practitioner of gunboat diplomacy, a term that refers to achieving foreign-policy objectives through vivid displays of naval might. Last fall, Mr. Obama sent the aircraft carrier George Washington to the Yellow Sea for joint exercises with South Korea, sending a message to both North Korea and its key backer, China. The move echoed the Clinton administration's decision in 1996 to send the Seventh Fleet to warn China against attacking Taiwan."

gunfight at the ok corral

The gunfight at the O.K. Corral was a gunfight, which lasted less than a minute, between lawmen led by Virgil Earp and members of a loosely organized group of outlaws called the Cowboys on October 26, 1881, in Tombstone, Arizona. It is generally regarded as the most famous gunfight in the history of the American Old West.

Nobody knows for sure what happened, but there's a ton of speculation. And many movies.

gunpowder treason

The Gunpowder Plot was a failed attempt by a group of English Catholics to assassinate King James I of England during the opening of Parliament on November 5th 1605.

The plan was to blow up the House of Lords as the prelude to a popular revolt. The perpetrators embarked on the scheme after hopes of greater

religious tolerance under King James I had faded, leaving many English Catholics disappointed. One conspirator was Guy Fawkes, who was given charge of the explosives.

Owing to concerns about collateral damage, an anonymous letter of warning was sent to William Parker, 4th Baron Monteagle. He immediately showed it to the authorities. During a search of the House of Lords in the evening on November 4, 1605, Fawkes was discovered guarding 36 barrels of gunpowder —enough to reduce the House of Lords to rubble—and arrested. Most of the conspirators fled from London as they learned that the plot had been discovered.

In January 1606, during the first sitting of Parliament since the plot, the Observance of 5th November Act 1605 was passed, making services commemorating the event an annual feature of English life; the act remained in force until 1859. The tradition of marking the day with the ringing of church bells and bonfires started soon after the Plot's discovery, and fireworks were included in some of the earliest celebrations. In Britain, 5 November is variously called Bonfire Night, Fireworks Night, or Guy Fawkes Night.

November 5th firework displays and bonfire parties are common throughout Britain. Traditionally, in the weeks running up to the 5th, children make "guys"—effigies supposedly of Fawkes—usually made from old clothes stuffed with newspaper, and fitted with grotesque masks, to be burnt on bonfires. The word "guy," in the 19th century, thus came to mean an oddly dressed person and, in the 20th and 21st centuries, any male person.

guns before butter

"Guns before butter" refers to the debate over how governments should use their revenue. Should resources be used to build up the military, or should they be spent on domestic programs?

"Butter" represents nonsecurity goods that increase social welfare, such as schools, hospitals, parks, and roads. "Guns" refer to security goods such as personnel—both troops and civilian support staff—as well as military equipment like weapons, ships, or tanks. Because these two types of goods represent a tradeoff, a country cannot increase one without negatively impacting the other.

One theory on the origin of the concept comes from the decision to expand munitions before the US entered World War I. In 1914 the leading global exporter of nitrates for gunpowder was Chile. Chile maintained neutrality during the war and provided nearly all of the US's nitrate requirements. It was

also the principal ingredient of chemical fertilizer in farming. The US realized it needed control of its own supply. The National Defense Act of 1916 directed the president to select a site for the artificial production of nitrates within the US. This was presented by the news media as "guns and butter."

Perhaps the best known use of the phrase (in translation) was in Nazi Germany. In a speech on January 17, 1936, Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels stated: "We can do without butter, but, despite all our love of peace, not without arms. One cannot shoot with butter, but with guns."

This is in stark contrast to President Dwight D Eisenhower's comments. In his "Chance For Peace" speech in 1953, he referred to this very trade-off, giving specific examples:

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

"The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people."

I first came across the phrase when I read *Gun Before Butter*, a mystery by English novelist Nicolas Freeling, published in 1963. Finally, I know what it means!

Chicago piano

The term "Chicago piano" has been used as a nickname for a number of weapons, including submachine guns and anti-aircraft guns.

The first shipboard installation of an anti-aircraft gun, in 1939, was quickly nicknamed the Chicago Piano, possibly because it was the size of a baby grand piano and looked a little like a baby grand without its lid. The name also references the "tommy guns" used by gangsters in Chicago, which were nicknamed "Chicago typewriters."

bring a knife to a gunfight

The meaning of the phrase "bringing a knife to a gunfight" is that one is

inadequately prepared for a conflict. A knife is a deadly weapon, but a person with a gun has an inherent advantage: he can shoot the knife fighter before the knife fighter can get close enough to wound him.

eat one's gun

To commit suicide by shooting oneself in the head through the roof of one's mouth.

go off half-cocked

If you "go off half-cocked," you act too early or without thinking about it.

This expression originally referred to a flintlock or matchlock gun firing prematurely, before the trigger was pulled. The term comes from around 1700, when the hammer of a firearm could be set halfway between the firing and retracted positions. This setting was supposedly secure, but occasionally it slipped and the gun would go off unexpectedly. The term soon was transferred to other occasions when something was done prematurely, especially in the US.

However, the first figurative use of the phrase had a completely different meaning. When the 'half-cocked' imagery was first appropriated it meant tipsy, or half-drunk, though there doesn't appear to be any link between the mechanics of firearms and drunkenness. Several other 'half' phrases were also used in the 1700s to mean 'half-drunk.' 'Half-seas-over' was a nautical term that is listed in the first slang dictionary *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew*, circa 1700, with the meaning 'almost drunk.'

have gun, will travel

The phrase "have gun, will travel" is a colloquialism that basically means you're enthusiastic about whatever is going on.

The TV series *Have Gun Will Travel* ran between 1957 and 1964. Not the stereotypical hired gun, Paladin was a cultured Renaissance man. His business card read, "Have Gun, Will Travel - Wire Paladin, San Francisco," charging a flat fee of $1,000 for his services, a small fortune in the late 1800s. He wore black but was the good guy, typically helping the oppressed and the wronged.

The title is a variation on a cliche used in personal advertisements in

newspapers such as *The Times*, indicating that the advertiser (a job seeker) is equipped for a certain category of jobs and flexible about the location of the job.

A trope common in theatrical advertising at the time was "Have tux, will travel" (originally from comedian Bob Hope in 1954). The television show popularized the phrase in the 1950s and 1960s, and many variations have been used as titles for other works, including the 1958 science-fiction novel *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* by Robert A. Heinlein.

hired gun

The term "a hired gun" is used in a variety of ways. It can mean:
—a hired bodyguard, mercenary, or assassin
—an expert brought in to resolve complex problems or lobby for a cause
—a session musician hired by a band to play a part on the album

The wages are probably good, but the working conditions would make me nervous.

kill a fly with an elephant gun

To "kill a fly with an elephant gun" means to take excessive, overcomplicated, or extravagant means to accomplish something relatively minor or simple.

An elephant gun is a large caliber gun, rifled or smoothbore, originally developed for use by big-game hunters for elephant and other large game.

loose cannon

A "loose cannon" was a hazard on the decks of a battleship. Figuratively, it has come to mean a person acting in a wild and unpredictable manner.

In the days before ships were equipped with fixed-turret guns, muzzle-loading cannons were mounted on wheels and rolled back and forth between gunports. A gun not properly secured could break loose either from the force of recoil or from the movement of the vessel in choppy waters, presenting a hazard to sailors and other equipment.

The earliest recorded use of the phrase loose cannon to mean "a dangerously uncontrollable person or thing" dates to 1973, in a memo sent to President Richard Nixon.

Quaker gun

A "Quaker gun" is a replica gun, usually made of wood.

A Quaker gun is a deception tactic that was commonly used in warfare during the 18th and 19th centuries. Although resembling an actual cannon, the Quaker gun was simply a wooden log, usually painted black, used to deceive an enemy and delay an attack. The name derives from the Religious Society of Friends or "Quakers," who have traditionally held a religious opposition to war and violence.

rifle / riffle

To "rifle"(verb) is to search through something quickly and carelessly usually in order to take or steal something. "She rifled through my refrigerator."

To "rifle" (verb) also means to cut spiral grooves inside the barrel of a firearm.

A "rifle" (noun) is a firearm.

Rifle turned up in the late 1300s and comes from the Old French word meaning to "steal, scratch, scrape, or plunder."

To "riffle" (verb) means to turn over something, especially the pages of a book, quickly and casually. "I riffled through my book and found the letter I'd hidden last week." When "riffle" showed up in the 18th century, it referred to storm damage, specifically the stripping of slate, tiles, and other roof coverings.

To rifle or to riffle; that is the question.

Saturday night special

"Saturday night special" is a colloquial term in North America for inexpensive, compact, small-caliber handguns made of poor quality metal. Sometimes known as junk guns, some states define these guns by means of composition or material strength. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, they were commonly referred to as suicide specials.

The earliest known use of the term "Saturday night special" in print is in the September 29, 1917, issue of *The Coffeyville Daily Journal,* referring to a

"cheap revolver."

The term came into wider use with the passing of the Gun Control Act of 1968 because the act banned the importation and manufacture of many inexpensive firearms. However, a number of companies in the US then began production of inexpensive handguns.

smoking gun

A "smoking gun" is the strongest kind of circumstantial evidence of illegal or criminal activity. The term alludes to the smoke emitted by a revolver or other kind of gun that has just been fired. Direct evidence would be the eyewitness testimony of someone who saw the actual act. In law, the term is often used to describe a piece of circumstantial evidence that will lead to a person's conviction.

The phrase originally came from the idea that finding a very recently fired (hence smoking) gun on a suspect wanted for shooting someone would in that situation be nearly unshakable proof of having committed the crime. A variant of the phrase (smoking pistol) is used in the Sherlock Holmes story, *The Adventure of the Gloria Scott*" (1893).

"Smoking gun" reached cliché status some 80 years after the short story was published. That's when the Watergate crisis lodged it firmly into the American lexicon. A *New York Times* article written during the height of the scandal on July 14, 1974, notes that the main question members of Congress were asking as they considered impeaching President Richard Nixon was, "Where's the smoking gun?"

The meaning of "smoking gun" has evolved in uses completely unrelated to criminal activity. The phrase has found use in investigations of world politics, the tech industry and even reality television. For example, scientific evidence that is highly suggestive in favor of a particular hypothesis is sometimes called "smoking gun evidence."

spike someone's guns

To "spike someone's guns" is to ruin an opponent's plans, or prevent his success.

In the past, when soldiers captured a large enemy gun which they could not move, they hammered a nail or spike into the hole where the gunpowder was put. They would do this to their own guns if forced to abandon them in a

retreat. This meant that the gunpowder could not be lit and so the gun would not work. The phrase arose in the late 1600s.

The term has been used figuratively since then. You spike someone's guns by rendering his arguments or advantages inoperative.

top gun

A "top gun" is the most successful, important, or influential person in a group. For example, "He's the team's top gun."

give someone both barrels

To "give someone both barrels" is to attack, criticize, or punish someone very forcefully. The phrase is a reference to double-barreled firearms, which deliver the maximum damage when both barrels are fired.

with all guns blazing

To go into something "with all guns blazing" is to do so forcefully and with all of one's energy and a strong sense of urgency or purpose. "I went into the meeting with guns blazing, determined not to let him win."

To "go down with all guns blazing" means to resist to the very end with all one's vigor and resources. This phrase dates from the 1700s, but in its literal sense, when it was first used to describe a desperate naval or military engagement, it dates from at least the 1500s.

Chekhov's gun

"Chekhov's gun" is a narrative principle that states that every element in a story must be necessary, and irrelevant elements should be removed. For example, if a writer features a gun in a story, there must be a reason for it, such as it being fired some time later in the plot. All elements must eventually come into play at some point in the story.

The principle is recorded several times in letters by Anton Chekhov, with some variation; it was advice for young playwrights.

The term has come to mean an insignificant object that later turns out to be important. For example, a character may find a mysterious necklace that turns

out to be the power source to the Doomsday Device, but at the time of finding the object, it doesn't seem important. The necklace was essential to the story, but its introduction downplayed its importance. Chekhov's advice wasn't necessarily to conceal importance, but to not spend time on things that aren't important.

The principle is carried out somewhat literally in many of the James Bond films, in which the spy is presented with new gadgets at the beginning of a mission — such as a concealed, wrist-activated dart gun — and typically each device serves a vital role in the story. The principle dictates that only the devices utilized later in the story may be presented.

According to Chekhov, "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." Here the "gun" refers to a monologue that Chekhov deemed superfluous and unrelated to the rest of the play.

Not all authors, of course, agree with this principle. Ernest Hemingway mocked the principle in his essay *The art of the short story*, giving the example of two characters who are introduced and then never mentioned again in his short story *Fifty Grand*. Hemingway valued inconsequential details, though he conceded that readers will inevitably seek symbolism and significance in them.

keep your powder dry

The phrase "keep your powder dry" means you should be prepared and conserve your resources, but also be ready to take action if necessary. To be usable, gunpowder must be dry.

This advice reputedly originated with Oliver Cromwell during his campaign in Ireland. In *Ballads of Ireland*, 1856, Edward Hayes wrote:

"There is a well-authenticated anecdote of Cromwell. On a certain occasion, when his troops were about to cross a river to attack the enemy, he concluded an address, couched in the usual fanatic terms in use among them, with these words: 'put your trust in God; but mind to keep your powder dry'."

I've heard the saying many times as "Trust in God but keep your powder dry." It struck me as another way of saying, 'God helps those who help themselves.'

sitting on a powder keg

If you're "sitting on a powder keg," you're in a situation that could quickly

become very volatile and dangerous. This metaphor alludes to sitting on a keg of gunpowder that could go off at any moment. It dates from the early 1900s.

quick on the draw

"Quick on the draw" means being very fast in taking one's gun from its holster or in acting or reacting in other ways. For example, "Melanie was quick on the draw when it came to picking up her paycheck."

The term comes from the gunslingers of the American West and was transferred to other kinds of quick reaction in the first half of the twentieth century.

"Quick on the trigger," on the other hand, is a century older, appearing in a letter of 1808: "I trust that all your Aids will be quick on the trigger."

trigger warning

A "trigger warning" is a statement cautioning that content (as in a text, video, or class) may be disturbing and thus trigger distress. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says the term's first published use was in the title of a September 1993 Usenet group post.

trigger finger

"Trigger finger" means the forefinger, the one used in pulling the trigger of a firearm.

It's also a nickname for a medical condition in which a finger (or, frequently, thumb) becomes stuck in a bent position as though it were pulling on a gun's trigger. The condition, also known as stenosing tenosynovitis, is caused by inflammation around the tendon in the affected finger.

hair trigger / hair-trigger

"Hair trigger" (unhyphenated) means a gun trigger adjusted to respond to a very slight pressure.

"Hair-trigger" (hyphenated) means to be immediately responsive to the slightest stimulus. For example, "He has a hair-trigger temper." This might mean an unstable situation that could be made worse by the slightest mistake.

trigger-happy

Someone who is "trigger-happy" is only too willing to use a gun or violence, without careful thought. A trigger-happy hunter is inclined to shoot before clearly identifying the target.

The figurative use describes someone aggressively belligerent in attitude or marked by extreme intensity of emotions or convictions.

The phrase dates to the Second World War (1939-45), and is of American-English origin.

caught in the crosshairs

A crosshair is a shape superimposed on an image that is used for precise alignment of a device. Crosshairs are usually a "+" shape, but can be dots, posts, circles, or chevrons. Most commonly associated with telescopic sights for aiming firearms, crosshairs are also common in optical instruments used for astronomy and surveying, and in graphical user interfaces as a precision pointer. The crosshair was invented by Robert Hooke, and dates to the 1600s. Used figuratively, "caught in the crosshairs" means a situation in which you are the target or victim of somebody's anger, violence, or blame.

point blank range

If you're so close to the target that you can't possibly miss, you're at "point blank range." The expression can also mean "without hesitation, deliberation, or equivocation," such as refusing a request point-blank or bluntly.

The "blank" comes from Old French *blanc*, meaning white, which was the color of a bull's eye target center. The "point" may have referred to the point of the arrow that was about to be fired. Another interpretation is that 'point-blank' just meant 'pointing at the (blanc) target.'

The figurative 'direct and blunt' meaning came into use around the turn of the 1600s and was listed in John Florio's dictionary *A worlde of wordes*, 1598, in which he equates 'forthright' with 'point blanke.'

5 – Straight Shooter

shoot!

"Shoot!" is a mild exclamation of anger, annoyance, regret, or disgust. It's typically preceded by the interjections "ah," "aw," or "oh." The expression is a very mild curse and a substitute, if not a euphemism, for "Oh, shit."

shoot from the hip

To "shoot from the hip" is to speak or act rashly, recklessly, or bluntly, without consideration of potential consequences. This phrase originated in America, during the Old West cowboy days. It alludes to shooting a gun from the hip, without taking it out of the holster. This made firing quicker, but far less accurate.

scattershot

Anything that's "scattershot" is very broad and disorganized. A scattershot method of planting a garden means sprinkling wildflower seeds randomly around the lawn, rather than digging a flower bed and preparing the soil.

The word scattershot comes from a shotgun that shoots small pellets in a wide range, rather than zeroing in on a specific target. It's used today for any action that takes that kind of haphazard, indiscriminate approach. A scattershot education might mean learning a little of this and a little of that, instead of delving deeply into one subject. And a scattershot response to a forest fire could be an ineffective attempt at quashing the flames here and there, rather than a deliberate, focused effort.

a straight shooter

A straight shooter is an honest person. This slangy Americanism, dating from the second half of the 1900s, likens honest speech to the direct path of a bullet or arrow.

Straight and strait are homophones (two words pronounced alike but different in meaning or spelling). If you express no emotion, you have a straight face;

an upright person is a straight shooter.

However, if you find yourself in a difficult situation you are in dire straits. If you're on a ship, you may be in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, between Canada and the US. Or possibly in the Strait of Gibraltar, which separates Europe and Africa. Straitjacket and straitlaced are the more commonly used forms of the word "strait."

shotgun

A "shotgun" (also known as a scattergun, peppergun, or historically as a fowling piece) is a long-barreled firearm designed to shoot shells which discharge numerous small spherical metal projectiles called shot, or a single solid projectile called a slug. The word originated in the US in the 1820s.

According to Wikipedia, the word shotgun also describes an action in football, an offensive formation, used especially for passing, in which the quarterback receives the snap several yards behind the line of scrimmage.

shotgun wedding

A shotgun wedding is one arranged in response to pregnancy resulting from premarital sex. The phrase comes from the supposed implication that the bride's father is holding a shotgun to the groom's head to make sure that he goes through with the marriage.

Sinclair Lewis used the term in his 1927 novel, *Elmer Gantry*.

shotgun house

A "shotgun house" is a long, narrow dwelling with rooms set in a line on either side of a hallway, down which one could fire a shotgun from front to back without hitting anything. In essence, a shotgun house is a narrow building with a door at each end, common in the Southern US from the end of the Civil War until the 1920s.

Alternative names include shotgun shack, shotgun hut, shotgun cottage, and in the case of a multihome dwelling, shotgun apartment. The design is similar to that of railroad apartments. The architecture was brought to America by Haitian refugees fleeing the revolt at the beginning of the 1800s. The first shotgun homes in the US were erected in New Orleans.

like shooting fish in a barrel

To say that something is "like shooting fish in a barrel" means it's extremely easy or ridiculously simple. It dates from the 1900s. Gene Fowler used it in *The Great Mouthpiece* (1931). Presumably it was already a well-known phrase.

The origin of this idiom is a mystery, but one theory is popular. In the past, after fish were caught, they were prepared for sale in the market place. The fish were tightly packed into barrels filled with ice. If someone were to shoot into that barrel, they'd be guaranteed to hit one.

No kidding!

a cheap shot

A "cheap shot" is a physical blow against someone who is unready or unprepared. It often applies to sports in which physical contact is involved. It also means a critical statement that takes unfair advantage of a known weakness of the target.

don't shoot the messenger

The phrase "don't shoot the messenger" means you shouldn't treat the bearer of bad news as if they were to blame for it. Being the bearer of bad tidings has been a traditionally thankless task.

An early literary citing of "killing the messenger" was expressed in *Antigone* by Sophocles as "no one loves the messenger who brings bad news" or "no man delights in the bearer of bad news."

The sentiment that one should not kill the messenger was expressed by Shakespeare in *Henry IV, Part 2* (1598), and in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cleopatra threatens to treat the messenger's eyes as balls when told Antony has married another, eliciting the response "Gracious madam, I that do bring the news made not the match."

The term also applied to a town crier, an officer of the court who made public announcements in the name of the ruling monarch, often including bad news. Harming a town crier was considered treason.

Shooting the messenger may be a common emotional response to unwanted

news, but it is not a very effective method of remaining well-informed.

give it a shot

"Give it a shot" is an encouraging remark to someone who wants to try something, often for the first time. The idiom is believed to have originated in the US in the late 19th or early 20th century. Its origins are associated with sports, specifically shooting sports, where 'giving a shot' meant making an attempt at hitting a target.

hot shot

If you're a "hotshot," you're extremely good at a particular thing. A young chess hotshot might win every game within the first few moves.

Hotshot is an informal word for an expert or a whiz, for example, a person trained to fight forest fires, especially in remote areas.

Hotshot originally meant "reckless person," and briefly, in the 1920s, "fast train."

I'll bet it could mean heated brandy, too.

shoot me

"Shoot me" is an expression of dismay, where the speaker is expressing, metaphorically, his or her wish to die because of a bad experience. This phrase can also be used with the ironic meaning 'kill me, I am to blame,' equivalent to the Latin phrase *mea culpa*.

like a shot

To do something "like a shot" means doing it without delay or hesitation, with no time intervening. It probably arose from understanding how fast bullets move.

long shot

When people say, "it's a long shot," they are implying that the success of a particular situation is highly unlikely. It suggests that the chances of

something happening are slim, similar to the odds of winning a bet placed on a long shot in a horse race. It's often a venture that offers a great reward if successful but has very little chance of success.

The reference is to someone shooting at a target from a very long distance.

not by a long shot

"Not by a long shot" means not a remote chance or not by any means. It is used for emphasis when something a described as being far from its mark. For example, "$100,000 isn't enough to buy a house in New York — not by a long shot."

Early firearms were notoriously inaccurate, and a shot from a distance rarely hit the target. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, a "long shot" meant just that, a shot fired from afar. By the late 1800s the term had been transferred to other improbable circumstances, such as a wild guess or, more specifically, a bet against considerable odds. From about 1865, however, it also meant far-fetched.

"By a long shot" now mostly appears in the negative, like "no laughing matter," "no rest for the wicked," and "not for all the tea in China."

shoot 'em up

The phrase "shoot 'em up" is used as a noun to describe a video game genre in which the objective is to shoot a large number of enemies while maneuvering to avoid their attacks, especially by controlling a single spacecraft or aircraft. It also refers to Western action movies.

shoot a birdie

"Shoot a birdie" is not about knocking a wren off its branch. The term refers to the game of golf, in completing a hole in one stroke under par, or in one stroke less than the expected number of shots for a particular hole.

shoot blanks

Literally, to "shoot blanks" is to use blank cartridges in a firearm. The blank cartridge, when fired, does not shoot a projectile like a bullet or pellet, but generates a muzzle flash and an explosive sound (muzzle report) just like a

normal gunshot.

Blanks are often used in prop guns for shooting simulations that have no need for ballistic results, but still demand light and sound effects, such as in historical reenactments, special effects for theater, movie and television productions, combat training, for signaling (starting pistol), and cowboy mounted shooting. Specialized blank cartridges are also used for their propellant force in fields as varied as construction, shooting sports, and fishing.

While blanks are less dangerous than live ammunition, they can still be dangerous and can cause fatal injuries at very close range. Blank cartridges frequently contain a paper, wood or plastic plug called a wad that seals the powder in the case. This wad can cause severe penetrating wounds at close range and bruising at medium ranges.

Figuratively, to "shoot blanks" means to expel semen during orgasm without a single sperm in it.

shoot down in flames

To "shoot down in flames" is to judge harshly and to reject. It can mean destroying an argument or theory, or bringing about someone's downfall. For example, "They sent their perpetual motion ideas to the Royal Society. Of course, it was all nonsense and they were shot down in flames."

The phrase is an allusion to fighter planes being shot down in World War II.

shoot first, ask questions later

To "shoot first and ask questions later" means a quick or impulsive approach. It suggests taking action before fully understanding the situation or considering the consequences.

The saying originates from the Wild West, where law enforcement was sparse. It captures the spirit of those times, where individuals often had to act quickly in self-defense without time for careful consideration or negotiation.

shoot hoops

To "shoot hoops" is to play basketball, often casually by simply shooting and not engaging in a game. Some might call it taking practice shots.

shoot it out

To "shoot it out" means two opponents firing guns at each other until one of them is killed or defeated. It might also be applied figuratively to two people having an argument.

Or throwing snowballs at each other.

shoot someone a line

To "shoot someone a line" is an old-fashioned phrase meaning to make claims that are exaggeratedly boastful or untrue. Synonyms include boast, brag, tout, gas, bluster, swash (swashbuckler), and blow (blowhard).

I wonder, can you buckle a swash?

shoot the moon

The original expression is "to shoot for the moon," meaning to set oneself a very ambitious target without much chance of success. To "shoot the moon" means to actually attain great heights, a high value, or a numerically high measurement, especially as a result of a gamble or risky maneuver.

"Shoot the moon" can also mean to leave without paying one's bill or to "go for broke" in card playing. The first usage dates from the early 1800s and alludes to leaving in the dark of night (by moonlight). The second usage alludes to the card game of hearts, in which players lose points for every heart they hold at the end of the game. But in one version, a player dealt the right cards can "shoot the moon," that is, try to take all the hearts for a bonus.

Both expressions may be connected with the fact that the moon has long been used as a symbol for something utterly and unrealistically unobtainable. For example, "There's no use crying for the moon."

call the shots

If you "call the shots," you are the person who makes all the important decisions in an organization or situation.

The phrase has several other uses. It may also refer to a shooter saying which

part of the target she intends to hit. Alternatively, it may refer to a snooker or pool player saying which ball he intends to hit or which pocket he intends to hit it into. Additionally, there is a noteworthy association with the sport of curling, which originated in Scotland. In curling, the team leader, known as the "skip," would "call" the shot for each player, specifying details such as distance, speed, and line.

The origin of the idiom is not known, but it's been attributed to military practices, hunting, and several sports.

shoot your cuffs

To "shoot your cuffs" means to pull your shirt cuffs out to project beyond the cuffs of your jacket or coat. Displaying one's ornate or elaborate cuffs was a common practice among medieval noblemen.

According to tradition, a properly dressed man should allow about a quarter to half an inch of shirt cuff to peep out of his jacket sleeves, just enough to show his cufflinks.

Repeatedly shooting your cuffs can be a sign of nervousness. For example, Michael Crichton writes in *Prey* (2003), "As he talked, David continuously straightened his clothes — he smoothed his tie, shot his cuffs, snugged his collar, pulled up the creases in his trousers from his thighs. Then he'd cross one ankle over his knee, pull up his sock, cross the other ankle."

Just reading that makes me nervous.

shoot your mouth off

To "shoot your mouth off" means to speak without discretion, to speak too loudly or freely, especially about sensitive topics or information. It can be extended to mean being too talkative, especially in a bragging or boastful manner.

In some cases, doing so might net you a mouthful of knuckles.

a shot across the bow

A "shot across the bow" is a warning shot, either real or metaphorical.

Admiral William Smyth's *The Sailor's Word-Book: an alphabetical digest of*

nautical terms, 1867, defines the bow as "The fore-end of a ship or boat; being the rounding part of a vessel forward…"

"A shot across the bows" derives from the naval practice of firing a cannon shot across the bows of an opponent's ship to show them that you are prepared to do battle. For example, "In a very brief space we neared our victim, a large merchantman, whose appearance promised at once an easy conquest and a rich booty. At a signal from Stamar, a shot was fired across her bows to bring her to. She immediately hoisted a white flag."

A figurative use of the expression, just to mean warning, comes from this piece in The *Fresno Bee Republican*, just prior to WWII, in August 1937: "When the situation In Central Europe becomes threatening in the eyes of the great public, when press and official telegrams point to an immediate danger, the United States government will fire the third warning shot across the bows."

shot to hell

"Shot to hell" means ruined, worn out, or in very poor condition, especially as a result of misuse or mishandling. It can also mean someone has been riddled with bullets, causing catastrophic damage.

This term once meant literally "destroyed by gunfire," but by the late nineteenth century it was clearly figurative.

take a pot shot

To "take a pot shot" is to fire a shot easily or recklessly, without aiming carefully. The phrase comes from hunting. By extension, the phrase means to direct a cheap, unfair, or opportunistic insult or criticism at someone, especially someone who is vulnerable.

The figurative pot shot comes from hunting and is first recorded around 1836. A potshot (or pot-shot) was a shot at an animal meant to "get it in the pot," or kill it strictly for food, rather than for the sport of hunting — the implication being that sport shooting required more skill.

money shot

"Money shot" is slang for a photograph or film sequence of assured commercial value, as for its emotive power or prurient appeal.

Originally a broad term used generally in film-making, the "money shot" was simply the scene that cost the most money to produce. But it may also be the most provocative, sensational, or memorable sequence in a film, on which the film's commercial performance is presumed to depend. Even though the costs or technical challenges of filming an impressive scene may be huge, producers and directors will do whatever it takes to get that shot completed.

the shot heard around the world

The "shot heard round the world" is a phrase that refers to the opening shot of the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, which sparked the American Revolutionary War and led to the creation of the United States. It originates from the opening stanza of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1837 poem *Concord Hymn*. The phrase has subsequently been applied to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, a catalyst event for World War I, and hyperbolically applied to feats in sports.

turkey shoot

A "turkey shoot" is a hunt or hunting competition, using rifles or shotguns, in which wild turkeys are the prey. It may also be a situation in which numerous weapons are discharged against prey, opponents, or victims who have little ability to protect or defend themselves.

It can also refer to a shooting contest in which frozen turkeys are awarded as prizes, sometimes more generically known as a "meat shoot." The shoot is most commonly held using shotguns aimed at paper targets about 25–35 yards away.

Original turkey shoots date back at least to the time of James Fenimore Cooper and were contests in which live turkeys were tied down in a pen and shot from 25–35 yards. If a turkey was killed, the shooter received it as a prize.

It is astonishing what some people will do for fun.

Parthian shot

A "Parthian shot" is a sharp, telling, final remark, usually cutting or derogatory, made just before departing.

The phrase arose from the light cavalry hit-and-run tactic made famous by the Parthians, an ancient Iranian people. While performing a real or feigned retreat at full gallop, the horse archers would turn their bodies back to shoot at the pursuing enemy. The maneuver required superb equestrian skills, since the rider's hands were occupied by his composite bow and his body was twisted around. As the stirrup had not been invented at the time of the Parthians, the rider relied solely on squeezing pressure from his legs to stay mounted and guide his horse.

The tactic must have been successful. In first century BCE, Parthia stretched from the Euphrates to the Indus rivers, covering most of what is now Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The metaphorical use of "Parthian shot" is seen in *The Times*, April 1842: "They have probably enough dealt a Parthian shot to British interests, by setting the Nacional once more upon its legs."

A "parting shot" has almost the identical meaning. There's no real 'smoking gun' evidence to link the two idioms, though. "Parthian shot" is likely to be the original since the military tactic it alludes to is so ancient. On the other hand, the earliest known examples of "parting shot" pre-date those of "Parthian shot." It seems that the similarity between the two expressions is just coincidence.

"That last Parthian shot went home."
(Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930))

parting shot

A "parting shot" is a final insult hurled as one is leaving, or the last word in an argument.

Some authorities say that this term is a distortion of "Parthian shot," alluding to the ancient Parthians (first century BCE), renowned archers and horsemen, who would turn in flight to discharge arrows at the pursuing enemy. There is no firm evidence for this etymology, but it seems reasonable.

A "parting shot" is now a metaphorical term but it clearly alludes to the shooting of weapons. The first literal reference seen in writing is from John McLeod, who was surgeon of His Majesty's Ship *Alceste*. McLeod includes this comment in *A Narrative of a Voyage to The Yellow Sea*, 1818: "The consort, firing a parting shot, bore up round the north end of the island, and escaped."

The figurative use of the phrase comes not much later. For example, "I think it would be much more becoming…if you could separate without giving each other a parting shot. If you could but use this short sentence, 'we cannot agree and therefore we separate.'"

Parting is not always sweet sorrow.

6 – Bullets and Bangs

bullet

A "bullet" is an elongated metal projectile that is fired by a pistol, rifle, or machine gun and used for such functions as hunting, target shooting, training, and combat. Bullets are measured by their caliber, which indicates the interior diameter, or bore, of a gun barrel.

A modern bullet consists of a tube (the cartridge case) with the bullet affixed at the front end, the percussion cap or primer at the base, and the propellant powder contained in the tube between. Upon being struck by the gun's firing pin, the percussion cap detonates and ignites the propellant; the resulting rapid expansion of gases in the gun's closed firing chamber propels the bullet forward at high velocity along the bore. The cartridge case is left in the chamber and must be ejected by mechanical means.

The term 'bullet' is from Early French. The first true gun evolved in China from the fire lance (a bamboo tube that fired porcelain shrapnel) with the invention of the metal hand cannon sometime around 1288. The artillery cannon appeared in 1326 and the European hand cannon in 1364. Early projectiles were made of stone.

bullet point

A bullet point is a symbol that is used in writing to introduce an item in a list or to draw attention to specific information. A commonly used symbol to represent a bullet point is a centered dot (•), but many different symbols and characters can be used in bullet point lists, including numbers and/or letters.

Bullet points are most often used in technical writing, reference works, and presentations to organize major points neatly into a list.

sweating bullets

"Sweating bullets" means to perspire profusely or suffer mental anguish. The phrase suggests intense distress, anxiety, or worry. "I was sweating bullets over this interview."

The phrase arose as slang in the mid-1900s as an allusion to drops of perspiration the size of bullets.

bullet train

A "bullet train" is a high-speed passenger train, which is capable of reaching a maximum speed of approximately 199 miles per hour.

The first such train was the Japanese Shinkansen, which was completed before the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo. The literal meaning of "Shinkansen" is "new main line," but English-language publications dubbed it "bullet train," beginning in 1966.

Promotional ads suggest that the bullet train offers riders an exceptionally unique travel experience. For someone like me, used to city driving, that unique experience is probably a little too exciting.

dodge a bullet

To "dodge a bullet" means to avoid a difficult or unwelcome situation. It might also be termed "a close call," or "a narrow escape."

This expression was first used literally in the early 20th century to refer to someone who had avoided being shot in combat. The phrase took on a non-literal, or figurative, meaning in the second half of the 20th century.

go ballistic

To "go ballistic" means to fly into a rage or become very excited. "They claim the singer went ballistic after a member of his band failed to show up for a sound check."

This expression originally referred to a guided missile that went out of control. In the 1980s, someone used it to describe human anger and it quickly caught on. It is well on its way to being a cliché.

magic bullet

The phrase "magic bullet" means an effective or even fail-safe solution to a problem.

The term was coined by Paul Ehrlich (1854–1915), who won the 1908 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine. He gave the name to a compound that selectively targeted a particular bacterium without affecting other organisms. The name soon was transferred to other curative compounds, and later to other kinds of problems. For example, "The Federal Reserve has no magic bullet for dealing with high unemployment."

The name itself is a reference to an old German myth about a bullet that cannot miss its target. Ehrlich's discovery of Salvarsan in 1909 for the treatment of syphilis is termed as the first real magic bullet. It led to the foundation of the concept of chemotherapy.

silver bullet

The term 'silver bullet' is now used to refer to an action which cuts through complexity and provides an immediate solution to a problem, much like 'waving a magic wand.' It used to mean a highly accurate projectile of death or destruction. The use derives from the widespread folk belief that silver bullets were the only way of killing werewolves or other supernatural beings.

The belief in the magical power of silver, especially of weapons made from silver, is very ancient. Book XVI of Horace's *Odes* has it that the Delphic Oracle advised Philip of Macedonia to 'fight with silver spears.' References to the use of silver bullets date from the late 1600s.

A number of fictional Wild West heroes used silver bullets as weapons, to symbolize their purity of heart. The best known of these was the Lone Ranger, who typically arrived from nowhere, overcame evil and departed, leaving behind only a silver bullet and people asking, "Who was that masked man?"

Circa 1930, penicillin was a "silver bullet" that allowed doctors to treat and successfully cure many bacterial infections.

During the Korean War, an antiaircraft shell that hit precisely on target was called a "silver bullet." By the late 1900s, the term also was being used figuratively, as in, "We're hoping our new software will be the silver bullet to put the company on the map."

Then there's another kind of silver bullet. Harry Craddock's *Savoy Cocktail Book*, 1930, lists the ingredients for a silver bullet cocktail. It consists of gin, lemon juice and Kummel. "Shake well and strain into cocktail glass." There's probably no need to add "drink" to those instructions.

bang to rights

Being "bang to rights" means having enough evidence against a man to accuse him of a crime and to prove that he is guilty. You've got your man — got him bang to rights — evidence, witnesses, the lot. For example, "She was caught bang to rights on a bribery charge."

The phrase is a British expression. A North American variant is "dead to rights." 'Bang' or 'dead' is used to mean 'precisely,' much as it is in 'bang in the center,' or 'dead in the center.' 'To rights' means correctly, justifiably.

bang your head against a brick wall

To "bang your head against a brick wall" means to doggedly attempt, continuously and fruitlessly, to do the impossible and have your efforts repeatedly and painfully rebuffed.

Being unable to change a situation causes frustration and annoyance.

So, why don't you stop?

big bang

The Big Bang is a physical theory that describes how the universe expanded from an initial state of high density and temperature. The Big Bang theory was inspired by the discovery of the expanding Universe by Edwin Hubble.

In short, the Big Bang hypothesis states that all the matter in the Universe came into existence at the same time, roughly 13.8 billion years ago. At this time, all matter was compacted into a very small ball, with infinite density and intense heat, called a Singularity. Suddenly, the Singularity began expanding, resulting in the universe as we know it.

While this is not the only modern theory of how the Universe came into being — for example, there are also the Steady State Theory and the Oscillating Universe Theory — it is the most widely accepted. Not only does the model explain the origin of all known matter, the laws of physics, and the large scale structure of the Universe, it also accounts for the expansion of the Universe and a broad range of other phenomena.

with a bang

If something happens "with a bang," it happens in a sudden and exciting way, with a lot of energy.

"With a bang" first appeared in print in the 1500s. The meaning of the idiom depends on the context. It may mean an exciting, flourishing, energetic, or forceful manner. Or it can also mean in an extremely destructive or violent way.

not with a bang but a whimper

If you say that something happens "not with a bang but a whimper," you mean that it is less effective or exciting than was expected or intended.

T. S. Eliot, in his poem *The Hollow Men*, concludes:

> This is the way the world ends
> This is the way the world ends
> This is the way the world ends
> Not with a bang but a whimper.

7 – Emoting

get bent!

"Get bent!" is an exclamation of dismissal, anger, annoyance, or exasperation toward someone. For example, "I tried to apologize to him, but he told me to get bent."

But if someone tells you to get bent, what are they telling you to actually do?

Four synonyms are "get lost," "go soak your head," "get fucked," and "get stuffed." One source suggested that "get bent" is simply a polite version of those synonyms. The phrase is often extended to "get bent out of shape," meaning to become angry, anxious or upset.

The term is used not only as a dismissal, but as a business title (many times) and a book and song title. This, perhaps, makes sense, when we look at the history of "bent."

The word has many meanings, including drunk, drugged, and crooked, as in larcenous. A piece of wire or a bow can be bent, an angry person can be bent out of shape, a speculator can be bent on making a killing in options.

In Old English, around 890, a "bend" was a fetter or a shackle—anything used to restrain or tie someone up—and to "bend" them was to fetter them. This was eventually superseded by "band" and "bond," which meant the same thing.

When the verb was first recorded around 1000 (as bęndan), it specifically meant "to constrain or bring into tension by a string," as an archer would draw a bow. Later, the verb acquired a new meaning—to arch or curve. This expanded to "to bow or curve, deflect, inflect, bow oneself, stoop, submit, yield," and also to "to direct or level a weapon, to aim, bring to bear, bring one's force or energies to bear."

Meanwhile, the participle "bent" emerged as an adjective with corresponding senses: arched, curved, bowed, stooped, directed, determined, and so on. Here are some of those adjectival meanings:
—braced for action, ready to spring, leveled or aimed like a weapon (c. 1330)
—forced into a curve, curved, crooked (c. 1374)
—arched (1380, when "bent brows" meant sharply curved eyebrows)

—determined or resolute (1548)
—furrowed (1647, when a "bent brow" was a frowning or wrinkled forehead)
—bound for or directed at (1697, as in "homeward bent travelers")

The figurative slang uses of "bent" came along in the 1800s. The most prolific of these have to do with being drunk or stoned, from which we get "bender" for a drunken binge.

In the 1900s, the drinking sense of "bent" was applied more widely (like the term "wasted") to narcotics use. And around that same time, the expression "bent out of shape" could mean drunk, high on drugs (especially LSD), or angry, while the phrase "get bent" could mean either "get stoned" or "go to hell!"

Another sense of "bent," penniless (that is, almost "broke"), came along at the same time. The use of "bent" for corrupt or "crooked" appeared then, too.

In an associated usage, the adjective also came to mean illegal or stolen, as in "bent car" or "bent goods" (dating from 1930). In addition, the Oxford English Dictionary has these senses of "bent":
—ruined or out of order (1930)
—eccentric or insane (both 1942)
—homosexual (1959)
—altered in pitch or tone (1950, used in music to describe a sliding or "blue" note)

Over the centuries, "bent" has become a multi-purpose word. So, if someone tells me to get bent, I guess I can choose among taking yoga classes, stealing from the petty cash, getting drunk, or experimenting with a queer lifestyle.

Or, I could go to hell, which is my preferred interpretation of "get bent!"

nocebo

Latin *nocebo* means "I will be harmful" and that contrasts with *placebo*, meaning "I shall please." In the late 18th century, people in medicine began using "placebo" for inert preparations prescribed solely for a patient's mental relief. As doctors began to observe the effects of placebos, some noticed that the harmless preparations actually sometimes caused detrimental effects on the patient's health. English speakers began using the word nocebo for substances causing such adverse reactions in patients in 1961.

With the placebo effect, someone might feel better after swallowing a pill, getting an injection or receiving another medical treatment, even if they were

given an inert treatment. With the nocebo effect, negative beliefs or expectations about a treatment may elicit symptoms of feeling sick, even when the intervention is a sham.

Experiments have shown that, due to the nocebo effect, warning patients about drugs' side effects can contribute to the causation of such effects, whether the drug given is real or fake. Negative expectations cause anxiety, which can release stress hormones and stomach acids that cause negative symptoms.

Some people maintain that belief can kill (e.g., voodoo death) or heal (e.g., faith healing). This problem of self-willed death is in some ways analogous to the death produced in primitive peoples by witchcraft.

outrage

As a noun, "outrage" means an act of violence, brutality, or insult, which is shocking and morally unacceptable. The noun also means a state of extreme anger which is often accompanied by a desire to shame and/or punish wrongdoers.

As a verb, it means to arouse fierce anger, shock or indignation in a person. "Outrage" is often used as a euphemism for rape.

Outrage was a useful tool for our ancient ancestors. When someone did something wrong, outrage fired up the tribe and motivated them to fix the problem. This helped to keep everyone in line, preventing bullies from taking over and sneaky ones from getting away with stealing.

For example, imagine a band of hunter-gatherers working together to trap game, which will be shared equally with everyone in the tribe. But one hunter finds a way of hiding his catch and keeping it for himself. The deception is discovered and outrage takes over. The hunter is threatened with ostracism, which is tantamount to a death sentence for someone living in such a small-scale society. The hunter confesses and agrees to share his meat. When this is done, all is forgiven.

Today's society is a highly technical and extremely complicated system but righteous indignation is one of our favorite national pastimes. Someone posts about the hunter instead of confronting him. Others share it, causing many to get outraged. But what does this viral outrage achieve? Nothing, except to provide profit for social media companies. There are many people who are eager to offend and many only too willing to be offended, and victims easily get used by others to provoke faux outrage.

Anger draws Internet clicks, which means that many people have a business model for getting you mad. There's a reason there is so much outrage out there. It's a very effective way to get your attention.

owly

If you're "owly," you're in a bad mood, cranky, or irritated. It could also mean that you resemble an owl, but we'll stick with cranky because that's the way we've always heard it used.

The rumor is that the association arose because many owls have tufts of feathers above their eyes which resemble the furrowed brow of a grumpy old man. Whether or not this is true, the adjective has been in use since the late 1500s.

tempting fate

To tempt fate is to do something that you know is risky or dangerous. Similar phrases are "sail close to the wind," and "play with fire."

A superstitious definition is to invite bad luck or unpleasant situations by showing one's confidence in something. *TV Tropes* defines "tempting fate" as when a character says something that dares the universe into making things miserable for him, and the universe takes him up on the challenge. Often, the character is commenting on how he's hit rock bottom and how things couldn't possibly get any worse — right before things do get worse. Another example is the guy in every horror movie who tells his friends, "I'll be right back," before wandering off by himself and who most certainly is not coming back.

Earlier idioms with a similar meaning were "tempt God," dating from the 1300s, and "tempt fortune," first recorded in 1603, with tempt fate appearing about 1700.

sacred cow

A "sacred cow" is a person, institution, custom, etc., unreasonably held to be beyond criticism. "The old government program has become a sacred cow."

The phrase comes from the belief of devout Hindus that cows are sacred animals and should never be harmed. The earliest American usage of sacred cow to mean "immune from criticism" was in the late 1800s.

have a cow

To "have a cow" means to become angry, excited, or agitated. "Don't have a cow, man—it's no big deal." It's usually reserved for someone who is overreacting to a situation that isn't serious.

This colorful expression paints a vivid but incongruous picture of someone losing their cool.

In the early 1900s, "cow" was slang for a fit of anger or rage. For example, "He went into a cow" meant he flew into a rage. This seems to come from the idea of a cow as a large, temperamental animal. Cows are definitely large, but not usually temperamental unless you interfere with their calves.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the phrase frequently appeared in newspapers, films, radio shows, and other media. The most recognizable use of the term "don't have a cow" comes from *The Simpsons* character Bart Simpson.

holy cow!

"Holy cow!" is an exclamation of surprise, astonishment, delight, or dismay, such as, "Holy cow, I forgot the wine!"

"Holy cow" is what's known as a euphemism or a "minced oath," which is a substitute for a taboo word, such as Christ or God or damn. Minced oaths have been around in the English language for hundreds of years. The variations on the "holy" theme have been in use since the mid-1800s, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first instance listed for this variety of minced oath in print comes in 1855, with "holy Moses!"

Then, there are holy mackerel, holy moly, holy smoke, and dozens of others. The oldest of these slangy expletives uses "mackerel," dating from about 1800. The one with "Moses" dates from about 1850 and "cow" from about 1910 or earlier. None has any literal significance, and moly is a neologism devised to rhyme with "holy" though it may also be a euphemism for "Moses."

Slang dictionaries list more, such as "Holy buckets" and "Holy cats" and "Holy Mike." An expression such as "Holy underwear" also employs a play-on-words, "holy" implying "riddled with holes."

The original "Captain Marvel" and "Batman" oaths, "holy (something

harmless)," were in turn spoofed in the later 20th century by whatever seemed relevant to the situation. Examples are: "holy flypaper," "holy cow," "holy felony," "holy geography," "holy schizophrenia," and "holy haberdashery."

The phrase "Holy cow!" was used by baseball players at least as early as 1913 and probably much earlier. Books were then available which explained that cows are famously considered as holy or sacred in Hinduism. The phrase became associated with several American baseball broadcasters, perhaps because swearing was forbidden by the baseball league.

And if you're a baseball player who just struck out again, and you're forbidden from swearing by the league, "holy cow" probably looks like a pretty good substitute for what you'd really like to say.

love is blind

"Love is blind" is what we say about people who are unable or unwilling to see the faults in those whom they love. But it can also mean that true love develops between people based, not on looks, but on their compatibility and personalities.

By the time Shakespeare used this phrase in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Henry V*, it was already well known, having been stated by Plato, Plautus, and, in English in the late 1300s, by Chaucer in *The Merchant's Tale*.

Then there's J Mason Brewer's advice in *Worser Days and Better Times*, 1965:

> I don't make love by the garden gate,
> For love is blind, but the neighbors ain't.

have designs on

To "have designs on" means to have a secret desire and plan to get something. For example, "She had designs on my job." The phrase is also used in a mildly humorous way to mean you want to date or have a sexual relationship with someone.

In the 1580s, the word "design" was used to mean "a scheme or plan in the mind." By 1700, it was used to mean an intention to act in some particular way, usually something harmful or illegal.

have the hots for

To "have the hots for" is to be attracted sexually or romantically to somebody. It can also mean to have a strong desire for something. "I have the hots for an ice cream cone." Which ought to cool me off.

basket case

Today, a "basket case" is an infirm or failing person, organization, or thing which is unable to function properly. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that in the early 1950s the phrase came to mean "a person who is emotionally or mentally unable to cope, especially because of overwhelming stress or anxiety."

The dictionary's earliest example of this usage is from Polly Adler's 1953 autobiography, *A House Is Not a Home*: "By New Year's, 1935, after three months in the new house, I realized I'd wind up a basket case if I didn't take a vacation."

Originally, however, in World War I, "basket case" referred to a soldier who had lost both arms and legs and therefore needed to be carried in a basket. The US military at the time denied that such soldiers existed. Again, in World War II, the idea was denied. In May 1944, in *Yank*, the Army Weekly, the then Surgeon General, Major General Norman T. Kirk, said:

"… there is nothing to rumors of so-called 'basket cases' — cases of men with both legs and both arms amputated."

But, considering the scale of the casualties in both wars, there must have been cases of multiple amputation. We can only assume the worst, that the US military didn't want such bad publicity to reduce the number of people wanting to join up.

people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones

This idiom is used to say that those who themselves are open to criticism or vulnerable to attack should not attack others.

It is a way of reminding someone not to act hypocritically. The phrase is also a warning. It suggests that if you throw stones at someone's house, you're very likely going to have someone do the same to you. The "glass house" part of the phrase is an interesting way of describing the fragility and instability of the stone-thrower's position.

This proverb dates from the time of Chaucer, who used a version of it in *Troilus and Criseyde* (ca. 1374).

put on airs

To "put on airs" is an English language idiom which means to assume a haughty manner and pretend to be more important than anyone else.

It is derived from the French word "air," meaning appearance, and was first used in the 1500s. It appears under the entry for the French word *poseur* meaning to pose, and more specifically "poseur: a person who pretends to be what he or she is not: an affected or insincere person." An 1869 textbook defines it as: "To put on a counterfeit appearance."

let nature take its course

To "let nature take its course" means to let events develop and conclude naturally, as they would without outside intervention, help, or interference. The phrase can refer to nature literally, or figuratively to manmade situations or events.

The concept of allowing nature to take its course can be traced back to ancient philosophies and belief systems that emphasized the importance of harmony and balance in the natural world. There's a parallel between this idiom and the idea of "going with the flow," which encourages us to adapt to the natural rhythm and direction of events.

go with the flow

To "go with the flow" means to engage in a situation without trying to change it or assert control over it. It can also mean to cope with adversity, to accept one's lot. One acts as others are acting, conforming to common behavior patters with an attitude of calm acceptance.

This term (or "go with the tide") dates from the late 1900s and alludes to the ebb and flow of tides and probably gained currency because of its appealing rhyme. It also alludes to the way water takes the path of least resistance and simply flows where gravity or other prevailing forces take it.

Some trace the roots of this phrase back to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. In his daily journals, which were later published as *Meditations*, he wrote at great length about the Stoic ideas he tried to incorporate into his daily

life. He writes, "Time is a sort of river of passing events, and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place, and this too will be swept away."

At the same time, the idea of 'go with the flow,' meaning that one should follow the crowd, is probably not an attitude that Marcus Aurelius had in mind. He was interested in going with the flow of nature and the universe but was notably opposed to doing things just because others were doing them.

all at sea

When you are "all at sea," you are feeling puzzled and perplexed, completely confused or unsure of a choice.

This is an extension of the nautical phrase 'at sea.' It dates from the days of sail when accurate navigational aids weren't available. Any ship that was out of sight of land was in an uncertain position and in danger of becoming lost. The ocean has long been a symbol of uncertainty and danger, reinforcing the idea of being lost or confused when one is "at sea."

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'at sea' has been in use in print since the 1600s.

down-to-earth

"Down-to-earth" is an adjective with two slightly different meanings, the first of which is "realistic and sensible." You could say that someone who's down-to-earth has a lot of common sense and doesn't react emotionally to events. The second meaning is "modest or unpretentious," like a rock star who drives an old car and shows up at the local coffee shop. Either way, being described as down-to-earth is always a compliment.

This phrase is used to describe places as well as people. "I love little down-to-earth restaurants that serve simple but tasty food."

Me, too!

stand still for

To remain immobile in spite of aggravation.
To stop moving so that something can be administered, like a shot.
To accept, tolerate, endure, or put up with something. (Often used in the

negative to indicate the opposite.)

have a beef with

If you "have a beef with" someone, you have an outstanding or unsettled dispute or disagreement with that person.

We don't know where this saying arose. "Beef" is linked to strength and we describe muscular men as "beefy," but how is strength connected to a dispute?

cool your jets

People use this phrase to tell you to calm down, to suppress your eagerness or hastiness. Such cautioning began with air force pilots reducing their jet planes' air speed and, by so doing, reducing strain on the engine caused by excess heat. Among similar "relax!" phrases are "hold your horses," "chill out," and "keep your pants on."

have a blast

This phrase means to have a really good time, to enjoy oneself. This modern term may be derived from the basic sense of "blast" as an explosion or a loud noise, which could imply excitement or exhilaration. Or it may be related to a strong invigorating current of air. In Old English, the word meant "a blowing, a breeze, a puff of wind."

"Have a ball" is another expression meaning the same thing.

bane

A "bane" is a cause of continuous trouble or unhappiness or, more seriously, a source of harm or ruin (death, destruction, curse). The word is often used ironically or to exaggerate how awful something is. "The ugly school uniforms were the bane of the students' lives."

"Bane" is quite old, coming from Old English pretty much unchanged. "Bana" in Old English meant "killer, murderer, manslayer." It was often combined with other words, like brothorbana (brother killer), or handbana (one who kills with his own hand).

These days, the definition is much softer. The laser pointer is almost certainly

the bane of your cat's existence. Some people love avocado, while the hidden presence of guacamole in a burrito is the bane of someone else's lunch.

Bane is a comic book character, often an adversary of Batman.

spin one's wheels

To spin one's wheels means to waste time and effort for no gain, merely remaining in a neutral position, neither advancing nor falling back.

The phrase arose from the frustrating experience of driving a vehicle which won't move because its wheels are spinning in mud, snow, or sand, etc. This literal scenario soon became a metaphor for futile efforts in other areas of life. "I'm just spinning my wheels in this job."

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the ball's in your court

This expression means that it's now your responsibility to make the next decision or take the next step. The term comes from tennis, used when it is the opponent's turn to serve or return the ball.

step up to the plate

To "step up to the plate" means to take action in response to an opportunity, crisis, or challenge; to take responsibility for something. The expression originated in the language of baseball, where "the (home) plate" is a rubber slab at one corner of the diamond where the batter stands when batting.

buckle down

Literally, to "buckle down" (an earlier version is "buckle to") means to anchor or fasten something or someone in place.

Figuratively, the phrase means to start working hard on a task, often after a period of avoidance or procrastination. "All right, we'll buckle down now and study for exams."

The idioms knuckle down and buckle down can be used for the same things. Knuckle down started in the 1860s when kids played marbles. A boy would hold a shooter marble in his fist with the knuckles on the ground so he could flick the marble easily. Since a large portion of the game is about concentration, it's easy to see the evolution of the idiom.

push the envelope

To push the envelope means to surpass normal limits or attempt something viewed as radical or risky. It comes from the aeronautical use of "envelope," referring to performance limits that cannot be exceeded safely. The phrase was originally limited to space flight, before spreading to other risky physical accomplishments, and finally metaphorically to any boundary-pushing activity, such as art.

"Piccininni is the newest member of the Yonder Mountain String Band that's been redefining bluegrass music by pushing the envelope into realms of rock n' roll and improvisation." (*The Utica Observer-Dispatch*, 7 May 2020)

We usually think of "envelope" as an item of stationery, but there are a number of other senses of the word—many from science—that involve enclosure. These senses include such items as "the bag containing the gas in a balloon or airship" and "an enclosing membrane." The point is that an envelope is something which envelops.

The phrase was used frequently within the fields of space flight and aviation, but it found its way to general audiences when it appeared in Tom Wolfe's 1979 award-winning nonfiction novel *The Right Stuff*, about the Mercury Seven astronauts as well as other test pilots of rocket-propelled aircraft.

Wolfe didn't originate the term, although it's appropriate that he used it in a technical and engineering context, as it was first used in the field of mathematics.

In aviation and aeronautics the term 'flight envelope' had been in use since WWII. That envelope is the description of the upper and lower limits of the various factors that it is safe to fly at, which are: speed, engine power, maneuverability, wind speed, altitude, etc. By 'pushing the envelope,' that is, testing those limits, test pilots were able to determine just how far it was safe to go. By 1978 the phrase was in use in print.

With "envelope" suggesting a boundary of safety, "push the envelope" saw increased use as a phrase for ratcheting up the risk of an activity.

"Marathoners work their bodies hard. So do triathletes and those who make their living playing sports. But nobody pushes the envelope of human endurance quite as far as extreme racers. Burning calories and shedding electrolytes faster than their bodies can replace them, athletes like Rusch will lose up to 10 lbs. of water, fat and muscle in the course of a five-day race. By the time Rusch crosses the finish line, her organs are faltering, her muscles are deteriorating, and she's hallucinating wildly." (Alice Park, *Time*, 6 June 2005)

But metaphorical pushing the envelope is less often about physical danger and more about artistic risk, putting forward new and radical ideas that might not be immediately embraced—the cutting edge, so to speak, to use another term that employs the language of borders.

Metaphorical use of "push the envelope" now means that pushing the envelope comes with its own risks, but you don't need a pilot's license to do it.

sling your hook

This British idiom means, "go away, leave, shove off," and dates from the 1800s.

There are four theories for the source of the idiom. The most likely one is that it's a docker's phrase. Cotton and wool coming into British ports in the 1800s was in bales. It was common for dock workers to have hooks with which they would impale the bales in order to make them easier to carry. Since work was given out daily, queues of dockers would form, and when all the jobs for the day were allocated, the remaining dockers were told to "Sling your hook," as in "Toss away your hook or take it and leave, there's no work for you today."

The theory we've heard most often is that this term has a nautical origin. Hook was a name given to the ship's anchor, and the sling was the cradle that housed the anchor. Therefore, to sling your hook meant to lift anchor, stow it, and sail away.

This third theory depends on the use of words. "Sling" was often used as a replacement for "swing." To swing one's hook makes sense, since hook was the short name for a billhook or heavy curved pruning knife. But that phrase has nothing to do with "going away."

The final theory says the hook is one on which a miner would hang his day clothes. When he finished his shift down the pit, he would change, collect his possessions from his hook, and leave.

stay in one's lane

To "stay in one's lane" is to avoid interfering with or prying into someone else's affairs, criticizing, or giving unsolicited advice about issues beyond one's purview or expertise. In brief, to mind one's own business.

Much of the phrase's early figurative use comes from football (and occasionally other sports in which one player is assigned to defend against another), where "stay in your lane" is viewed as advice to worry about your own assignment and not try to take on the job of defending a different opponent, which can lead to blown coverages and chaos.

give a man enough rope to hang himself

This idiom suggests that if you give a man the freedom to do or say things in the way he wishes, he'll eventually screw up. For example, if you let a criminal talk freely, he may incriminate himself. If you let a politician go on manipulating people, he may manipulate himself into big trouble. "Don't interrupt the suspect with questions, just let him keep talking. Give him enough rope to hang himself!"

John Ray included this expression in his 1670 book of proverbs. The first known use of it in a form similar to the modern version is in *The History of The Holy War* (1639) by English historian Thomas Fuller.

two wrongs don't make a right

This proverb tells us that the fact that someone has done something dishonest is no justification for acting in a similar way. For example, if someone has vandalized your property, it's not acceptable for you to vandalize theirs.

This is another way of saying that taking revenge is a bad thing. It also says that it's not acceptable to do a bad thing just because someone else has done it.

This is a philosophical question that has been argued endlessly. I don't believe there's an answer which fits every situation.

fell off the back of a truck

This phrase means that an object has come into a person's possession without having been paid for (acquired illegally). "He said he bought it at the markets but I think it fell off a truck."

It's similar to *The Godfather's* "an offer he can't refuse." Other phrases that relate specifically to stolen goods are the "five finger discount" and "I got it from a man in a pub."

crime doesn't pay

The proverb 'crime doesn't pay' takes the view that punishment rather than profit is the ultimate consequence of crime. In England, it was a Victorian saying meant to encourage morality and work. It was something that, for the smooth working of society, the authorities wanted the populace to believe.

In the US, this maxim originated as a slogan of the F.B.I. and was given wide currency by the cartoon character Dick Tracy. It may have been used because

of the gang activity and lawlessness prevalent during the American Prohibition Era, when crime was often in the headlines.

There have been numerous jocular plays on it, as in Woody Allen's screenplay for *Take the Money and Run* (1969): "I think crime pays. The hours are good, you travel a lot."

let the punishment fit the crime

"Let the punishment equal the crime" is a maxim of Roman law meaning that the punishment prescribed for a crime should be proportional to the seriousness of the crime.

The concept is found in most world cultures and in many ancient texts. In all ancient legal systems, retribution for wrongdoing took precedence over the enforcement of rights. A sense of natural law demanded that a criminal should be punished with similar loss and pain to that which they inflicted on their victim. Therefore, the concept of *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye) was common in ancient law.

As opposed to revenge, retribution—and thus retributive justice—is not personal, is directed only at wrongdoing, has inherent limits, involves no pleasure at the suffering of others, and employs procedural standards. Retributive justice contrasts with other purposes of punishment such as deterrence (prevention of future crimes), exile (prevention of opportunity) and rehabilitation of the offender.

Some purposes of official retribution include:
—to deter people from resorting to forms of vigilante self-help.
—to promote social solidarity through participation in the act of punishing, under the theory that "the society that slays together stays together."
—to prevent a situation where crime does pay.

Traditional alternatives to retributive justice have been exile and shunning. In pre-modern societies such sentences were often the equivalent of the death penalty as individuals would find it impossible to survive without the support and protection of the society that they had wronged.

calaboose

A calaboose is a prison. "They'll throw you in the calaboose if they find out that you were involved in the robbery." Calaboose is Spanish in origin; it's from the Spanish word calabozo, meaning "dungeon," and has been in use in

America since about 1790.

Quite simply, a calaboose is a tiny jail. Designed to house prisoners only for a short time, a calaboose could be anything from an iron cage to a poured concrete blockhouse. In *The Texas Calaboose and Other Forgotten Jails*, William E. Moore has compiled the first guidebook to extant calabooses in Texas. He explores the history of the calaboose, including its construction, use, and eventual decline.

In certain ways, these small jails encapsulate the history of outlying communities during a time of transition from the "Wild West" to the twentieth century.

peccadillo

A peccadillo is a small, relatively unimportant offense. It's usually used to describe a minor misdemeanor, often sexual misconduct, or an infraction of an ethical code. It was derived, circa 1590, from the diminutive of the Spanish language word *pecado* meaning sin.

runagate

A "runagate" is a runaway, a fugitive or deserter, a person who drifts or wanders about, or a vagabond. Runagate is a corruption of "renegade."

A renegade is defined as a person who deserts and betrays an organization, country, or set of principles. It can also mean one who rejects lawful or conventional behavior. It's first found in print in the early 1600s. Synonyms are: traitor, defector, deserter, turncoat, betrayer, rebel, outlaw, runagate, and tergiversator. Our modern slang term is "rat," which is much easier to pronounce and spell than "tergiversator."

When I first heard of "runagate" being a synonym for "renegade," I immediately got a mental image of someone running out a gate and that image seemed to be a reasonable explanation of the term.

But this is how urban legends get started. A "reasonable explanation" for something makes such a good story that people start believing it's true and finally swearing it's true because it makes so much sense.

But, in fact, "agate" means "away" and also a beautiful semi-precious stone. It has nothing to do with gates. So "runagate" is simply "run" plus "agate" (away).

The word is still in use. One of Robert Hayden's most successful historical poems, *Runagate Runagate* (published in 1962), portrays the world of escaped slaves, and ultimately the fundamental human impulse toward freedom.

answer the call of nature

Saying that you need to "answer the call of nature" is an informal way of saying that you have to go to the toilet and satisfy the bodily urge to urinate or defecate.

On the one hand it alludes to such an urge being natural and on the other it uses veiled language to cover it up. Prior to its use as a euphemism, 'call of nature' was used to describe our urge to enjoy the pleasures of rural tranquility.

The euphemistic meaning was coined in the mid-18th century and begins appearing in print around that time. This entry was published in October 1852 in the *Tailor & Cutter* magazine: "The calls of Nature are permitted and Clerical Staff may use the garden below the second gate."

have a dekko

"Have a dekko" is a largely British expression meaning "have a look."

The word is one of those that the British army harvested during the period of governance of India known as the British Raj (1858 – 1947). Here are just a few of the many everyday words they learned: avatar, bandana, bazaar, cashmere, dinghy, guru, nirvana, pyjamas, shampoo, and swastika. Those were assimilated into English with more or less correct spelling.

The British in India also appropriated words to form new phrases in English, for example:

Go doolally (from the place name Deolali)
Tickety-boo (from the Hindi 'ṭhīk hai,' meaning all right)

'Have a dekko' belongs on that list. 'Dekho' is a Hindi word meaning 'look.' The expression first began to be used by the British in India in the middle of the 1800s and soon migrated back home with soldiers on leave. 'Have a dekko' is first found in print in January 1856 in *Allen's Indian Mail*, a newspaper devoted to news of India and China aimed at the families of servicemen stationed there.

Another odd-sounding phrase in the British lexicon is 'have a gander.' This sounds as though it could be either a mispronunciation of a foreign word or rhyming slang. In fact, it's neither. It merely alludes to the bird's habit of stretching its neck high when looking for predators.

call it a day

To "call it a day" means to stop a particular activity for the rest of the day. We might say, "It's after three o'clock so let's call it a day," meaning that you want to stop working, or traveling, or whatever you might be doing. Similarly, "call it a night" means to stop something for the rest of the night, as in "One more hand of bridge and then let's call it a night."

Oh, dear! No more bridge? Surely the night must be longer than this.

This phrase was born when a worker went for home before finishing the normal day's stint, and originally related to the phrase "call it half a day." Initially found in 1838, it was used to say goodbye to work by employees before the working day was over.

movers and shakers

"Movers and shakers" are energetic, powerful people who initiate change and influence events. The expression is now most often applied to the rich and powerful in politics and business, but it began as part of a poem.

The poem was Arthur O'Shaugnessy's *Ode*, from his *Music and Moonlight* collection, which was featured in Sir Edward Elgar's popular choral work *The Music Makers* at the Birmingham Festival in October 1912.

> We are the music makers,
> And we are the dreamers of dreams,
> Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
> And sitting by desolate streams;
> World-losers and world-forsakers,
> On whom the pale moon gleams:
> Yet we are the movers and shakers
> Of the world for ever, it seems.

"Shakers" doesn't refer to the Shakers that are an offshoot of the Quaker religion, but simply to those who shake the foundations of conventional thinking by the strength of their imagination and vision.

Although the first two lines of the poem became well known, the phrase "movers and shakers" didn't catch on until American socialite and patron of the arts Mabel Dodge Luhan used it as the title of a volume of her autobiography, published in 1934. It is now exclusively applied to people in business and other positions of power.

moving the goalposts

"Moving the goalposts" means an unfair change of the target (or goal) of a process or competition by one side in order to gain advantage over the other side. It's a British metaphor, which came into use during the 1980s, and derives from sports that use goalposts.

Some include this metaphor as a description of the tactics of harassment. In workplace bullying, shifting the goalposts is a conventional tactic in the process of humiliation.

The figurative use alludes to the perceived unfairness in changing the goal one is trying to achieve after the process one is engaged in has already started. Moving the goalposts in a football game after the game has started would probably cause a riot.

the moving finger writes

The phrase "The moving finger writes…" expresses the idea that whatever you do in your life is always your own responsibility and cannot be changed. This line originated in Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the poem *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyam, 1859:

> The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

The poem is better known today than any other of the Victorian era. In it two principal themes are interwoven; first, the idea that life is fleeting and must be enjoyed before the opportunity is lost, and second, a feeling of resentment against Fate.

jump ship

In ancient times a sailor wishing to leave his ship without permission would jump over the side when close to shore and swim for it. Thus, suddenly

leaving a job, organization, or activity is now called "jumping ship," meaning to desert your post.

Sailors are required to "sign on" to a ship for the duration of the voyage. They ordinarily cannot leave until the voyage ends or the ship returns to home port. This is to ensure the safety of a ship at sea and prevent its safety being jeopardized by irresponsible crew.

get a wiggle on

This phrase, meaning to move quickly, or to hurry, originated in the 18th century. A common example: "Get a wiggle on, or you'll miss the bus."

By 1919 the phrase was also used in a song, "Get a wiggle on, get a wiggle on, Don't stand there with a giggle-on."

quick bites

to and fro — move back and forth (early 1300s)
move heaven and earth — do everything you can to achieve something
get smoked — be soundly defeated in a game or competition.
cut a rug — to dance, especially jitterbugging.

9 – Bagged

bag and baggage

The phrase "bag and baggage" means all one's belongings, especially with reference to going somewhere with them. It's also a synonym for "completely" and "totally."

It dates back to the 1500s, when soldiers went off to fight, hauling all of their belongings (including military equipment) in bags. Nowadays, it's used as in the following sentence: "The day he quit his job, John walked out, bag and baggage."

Shakespeare used it in *As You Like It*. Touchstone says, "Come, shepherd, let us make an honourable retreat; though not with bag and baggage, yet with scrip and scrippage," (meaning purse and money).

The words "baggage" and "luggage" have a lot in common. Baggage is the older word, and came to English from French (the path of many Latin-derived words) in the 1400s. It's possible that the *bag-* of baggage is the familiar English word for "sack to carry things in," but it's hard to know for sure. The origins of many words are dim in the mists of time.

We do know that the *lug-* of luggage is the word we still use to mean "to carry laboriously," which came from Middle English and a Scandinavian word meaning "to pull by the hair."

The major difference between baggage and luggage isn't the concrete meaning but the figurative meaning. We say "emotional baggage" and "political baggage" to refer to intangible things that get in the way—but luggage is never used in this way.

Baggage can also mean "a contemptible woman" or "prostitute." This meaning may have derived from the Middle French word *bagasse* (prostitute) and not from bag.

Merriam-Webster has the last delightful word: "In the vast majority of instances, however, you'd be hard pressed to find two words so well adapted to carry their own weight."

bag

The word "bag" is used in an amazing variety of ways. The word has been around since the days of Middle English, when it was spelled bagge, and probably came from the Old Norse *baggi*.

As a noun, bag means:
—a flexible container used for carrying or storing items
—a handbag; a purse
—a piece of portable luggage
—a sagging part of the body, such as a cow's udder
—an object that resembles a pouch
—the sagging or bulging part of a sail
—the amount that a bag can hold
—an amount of game taken
—in baseball, a base
—an area of interest or skill: "Cooking is my bag."
—a woman considered ugly or unkempt
—a small envelope containing narcotics

As a verb, to bag means:
—put something in a bag
—capture or kill as game: "bagged six grouse"
—cause to bulge like a pouch
—grab: to take physical control of something suddenly
—give up a job: "One more nasty remark and I'll bag this job!"
—gain or acquire: "I bagged a scholarship."
—earn: "I bagged an acting nomination for a good performance."
—capture or arrest: "He was bagged for trespassing."
—accomplish or achieve: "I bagged an A on the test."
—skip: "I bagged classes for the day."
—abandon: "I bagged the idea and started from scratch."
—terminate the employment of someone
—hang loosely: "The pants bag at the knees."
—cause to swell

As an adjective, bagged means:
—drunk
(*But see article on "bagged" below.*)

Idioms based on the word bag:
bag it — cease an activity or bring lunch in a paper bag
bag out — quit or abandon an activity
bag some rays — to sunbathe
bag of tricks — a repertoire

bag of bones — a thin person
bag lady — a homeless woman carrying her possessions in shopping bags
old bag — insulting term for women. This meaning may date from the days when women who wanted to accompany their soldier-husbands on a train were accommodated in the baggage car.

The following additional idioms are defined in separate articles below:
in the bag
not my bag
let the cat out of the bag
bagman
leave someone holding the bag

The problem with the word "bag" is that it has so many senses that it even competes with itself. To bag a job is to get the job, but to bag a job also means to quit the job. Context is key.

in the bag

There are two meanings for "in the bag." If something is in the bag, you are certain to get it or to achieve it. Or you're drunk.

The allusion in this idiom is unknown. It may refer to a completed transaction, that is, an item bought and wrapped in a bag. But it may well refer to the game bag in which hunters place small game such as birds.

The phrase arose from a tradition of the New York Giants baseball team. This was recorded in May 1920, in the Ohio newspaper *The Mansfield News*: "An old superstition was revived at the Polo grounds, New York, recently when Eddie Sicking was dispatched to the clubhouse with the ball bag at the start of the ninth possession of a one-run lead. This superstition originated during the run of twenty-six consecutive victories made by the Giants in 1916, the significance of it resting in a belief that if the ball bag is carried off the field at that stage of the game, with the Giants in the lead, the game is in the bag and cannot be lost."

mixed bag

A "mixed bag" describes a haphazard collection of objects, people, or categories.

The "bag" usually contains positive and negative aspects, items or people that are unrelated or only tangentially related, or that must be dealt with in

different ways.

This phrase dates from the first half of the 1900s. For example, "Representatives of the press, a mixed bag in age, but not in sex," indicates journalists of many different ages but all either male or female.

punching bag

A "punching bag" is a stuffed or inflated leather bag that is usually suspended so that it can be punched or kicked for practice or exercise. It may also refer to a person who is a target of frequent criticism or abuse. "Sometimes I feel like the punching bag at work when everyone is getting stressed."

Punching bags are often filled with grains, sand, rags, or other material, and are usually hung from the ceiling or affixed to a stand. Other bags have an internal bladder to allow them to be filled with air or water. The design of a punching bag allows it to take repeated and constant physical abuse without breaking. The bag must also absorb the impact of blows without causing harm to the user.

Punching bags have been used in martial arts and swordplay everywhere in the world for the entire written history of military training.

not my bag

Saying "it's not my bag" is a polite way of saying that you have no interest whatsoever in what is being suggested or discussed. A synonym is: "I'm not into it." The phrase can also be used to admit ignorance of a certain subject.

The expression originated the 1960s in U.S. jazz slang. A 1962 *Jazz Journal* issue describes bag as "a current piece of trade jargon for hip musicians, and means something between a personal style and a body of work." Another source says that "it's not my bag" is simply short for a phrase used by jazz musicians at the time: "It's not in my bag of tricks."

If you're British, you might say, "That's just not my bag of tea."

let the cat out of the bag

If you let the cat out of the bag, you're revealing a secret.

Humorist and writer Will Rogers once said, "Letting the cat out of the bag is a

whole lot easier than putting it back in." That certainly applies to cats as well as secrets.

Two main theories explain where the phrase originated but neither is very plausible. The first claims that the phrase refers to the "cat o' nine tails," once used by the British Royal Navy for punishment aboard its ships. The whip's nine knotted cords could badly scratch a sailor's back, like a cat's claws. The bag comes into play because the "cat," being made of leather, was kept in a sack to protect it from drying out and losing its flexibility.

The other theory suggests the phrase came from livestock fraud. Merchants would sell customers live piglets, which were stored in bags for easy transport. The buyer wouldn't discover they had been cheated until they got home, and a cat popped out of the bag. However, knowing cats as I do, I'm sure the cat would have clawed the bag to ribbons before it even left the market.

Perhaps the phrase merely represents an entertaining image of what happens when a secret is revealed. The shock and surprise when such truth is revealed could be likened to the commotion raised by a frightened cat suddenly loosed from the bag that imprisoned it. Or perhaps it comes from the fact that when secrets or cats are let out, they go wherever they want.

bagman

The word "bagman" has different meanings in different countries.

Britain — a traveling salesman
USA — someone who collects or distributes money for racketeers
Canada — a person who solicits money for a political party
Australia — a tramp or swagman, especially one on horseback

The word can include those who solicit bribes for public officials and, in organized crime, those who perform deliveries and run errands for other criminals.

leave someone holding the bag

If you leave "leave someone holding the bag," you leave that person to bear the responsibility or blame for what had been a joint venture. For example, "Her friends said they were too busy to help with cleaning up, and left Sally holding the bag." This idiom grew out of the earlier "give one the bag (to hold)," which dates from about 1600 and alludes to being left with an empty

bag while others have taken the valuable contents.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (1999) says, "To be deserted by one's comrades and left with the entire onus of what was originally a group responsibility."

Similar expressions are to be "left holding the baby," "left to carry the can," and "left in the lurch."

Another book, *Heavens to Betsy! and Other Curious Sayings* (1955), says the expression "left holding the bag" may refer to a "snipe hunt." A new boy in the community is invited on a "snipe hunt." The new kid is taken to the woods, left with a burlap bag and a lantern with instructions to hold the lantern over the open bag. The other hunters "return hilariously to town and their own warm beds." The joke is that it is a hoax; there is no such thing as a snipe. The new boy is left alone all night in the woods.

bagged

"Bagged" also has assorted meanings:
—put into a bag: "She bagged the groceries."
—acquired, captured, or killed, as in hunting
—obtained, caught, seized, or stolen
—Canadian: exhausted (fried, knackered, pooped)
—drunk

American slang speaks of being "bagged" from a job, just as Brits and Canadians more commonly speak of being "sacked" from a job, which makes sense since bagged and sacked are synonyms of each other. This use may reflect the way in which some companies fire employees — by handing them a garbage bag and telling them to put their belongings in it before marching them out the front door.

"Bagged" has been slang for drunk since the days when British printers called a pot of beer a "bag" and referred to intoxicated colleagues as having put their heads in a bag. "Bagged" as exhausted might as easily refer to bags under one's eyes, or to a sleeping bag, or to being killed, like the birds shot by a hunter and stuffed into a bag.

I'm going to bag a coffee. It's too early in the day to get bagged, whether that means getting hired, fired, or drunk.

bagatelle

"Bagatelle" is defined as follows:
—an unimportant thing, a trifle, a trinket
—a short, light piece of verse or music
—a game played on an oblong table with a cue and balls

"The question of who will pick up the coffee is a mere bagatelle in the overall planning of the conference."

The word is French, from Italian *bagatella*, meaning "knick-knack, bauble, or trinket."

baggy

"Baggy" is an adjective meaning to bulge or hang loosely, resembling a bag, as in baggy trousers or flabby cheeks. Applied to clothing, it means very loose-fitting, so as to hang away from the body. They often look sloppy, but it's easy to hide in baggy clothes and they're usually comfortable.

Figuratively, it can also mean loosely constructed and inflated with inessential elements, such as a "baggy novel."

Baggy is a British alternative dance genre popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and generally associated with the Northern UK's Madchester scene.

Alongside the music, a way of dressing emerged that gave baggy its unique name. Baggy jeans (often flared) alongside brightly colored or tie-dye casual tops and general '60s style became fashionable first in Manchester and then across the country — frequently topped off with a fishing hat. The overall look was part rave, part retro, part hippie, or part football casual. A number of bands even wore football shirts.

The meaning of "baggie," on the other hand, is a small, usually clear plastic bag used for holding small things or small amounts.

bagnio

A "bagnio" is a brothel, a prison for slaves in Asian countries, or a public bathhouse in Italy or Turkey.

Bagnio comes from the Italian word *bagno*, meaning public baths.

In England, it was originally used to name coffeehouses that offered Turkish baths, but by 1740, it signified a boarding house where rooms could be hired

with no questions asked, or a brothel.

10 – Windy

wind

"Wind" is one of those words which seems to have a million meanings, especially since it's used both as a noun and a verb. Here are just a few of them:
—air in motion
—breath
—winding yarn or winding a clock
—a winding path
—undergo winding up
—pursue quarry by following its scent
—in music: a wind instrument, ensemble, or player

Because I was raised on a farm, I'm very much aware of what the wind tells us about imminent weather patterns, so my favorite definitions and expressions for "wind" are the ones arising from the movement of air.

The formal explanation is this: global wind patterns are determined by differences in atmospheric pressure resulting from the uneven heating of the Earth's surface by the sun. As warm, moist air rises along the equator, surface air moves in to take its place, creating the trade winds. Some of the air that descends at the two tropics moves away from the equator, creating the westerlies. The eastward and westward movement of these wind patterns is caused by the Earth's clockwise rotation.

A few synonyms for the movement of air:
—breeze: a cool, light wind
—zephyr: a literary word for a soft, mild breeze
—gust: a sudden, brief rush of air: "A gust of wind scattered the leaves."
—blast: a brief but more violent rush of air

It's interesting to note the differences in attitude represented by two songs using the word "wind," one published in 1875 and the other in 1962.

Wind the horn (published 1875)
Composer: Henry Thomas Smart, Lyricist: Thomas Moore

> Wind thy horn, my hunter boy,
> And leave thy lute's inglorious sighs:
> Hunting is the hero's joy,

Till war his nobler game supplies.
Hark! the hound-bells ringing sweet,
While hunters shout, and woods repeat,
Hilliho!

Today, "wind your horn" would be expressed as "blow your horn."

Blowin' in the Wind (published 1962) is a song written by Bob Dylan. It has been described as a protest song and poses a series of rhetorical questions about peace, war, and freedom. The refrain, "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind," has been termed "impenetrably ambiguous."

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, and how many times must the cannon balls fly
Before they're forever banned?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind

Rather than do a long list of definitions for wind, I've listed below all the idioms that I could find. These will give a sense of the meanings by the way the word has been used.

in the wind

The expression "in the wind" alludes to perceiving something being brought or blown by the wind. When people say "there's something in the wind," they're saying that people are talking about a change that is about to happen, even though it is not yet clear what that change will be. It can be used to describe a change in the weather, a change in the political climate, or even a change in one's personal life. An example is, "There are new tax regulations in the wind."

This idiom alludes to the wind carrying a scent and is first recorded in the early 1500s. Shakespeare used it in *The Comedy of Errors*. Its origin is not known though it is thought to have been coined by sailors, who used it to describe the feeling that a storm was approaching. Sailors were very sensitive to changes in the wind, as they relied on it to power their ships. They could often detect a storm coming long before it was visible on the horizon. In other words, they "scent the wind."

"Something's in the wind" has appeared in many different cultural places throughout its history. For example, it has been used in song lyrics, book

titles, and movie titles. No doubt this is because it implies a mystery and thus creates suspense. Something is about to happen but we don't know what it is.

three sheets to the wind

"Three sheets to the wind" usually means "very drunk."

The expression is most likely derived from nautical terminology, in which a "sheet" is not a sail, but the rope that controls the sails of a tall ship. If the sheets run loose, the sail flutters about in the wind and the ship wallows off its course, out of control. Extend this idea to drunken sailors staggering back to the ship. Their uncertain locomotion reminded onlookers of the way a ship moved when the sheets were loose.

Sailors used to have a sliding scale of drunkenness: tipsy was just "one sheet to the wind" and "three sheets" was the falling-over stage. "Two sheets," of course, had to be somewhere in between.

Dickens used the expression figuratively in *Dombey and Son* (1848).

in the teeth of the wind

"In the teeth of" means in spite of, in opposition to, or in defiance of. Therefore, "in the teeth of the wind" means one is headed directly into the wind. For example, "The ship was headed into the teeth of the gale."

Originating from nautical terminology in the late 1200s, the phrase refers to sailing into the wind, or against it. This idiom is often used figuratively to describe a situation where someone is facing strong opposition or difficult challenges.

An example from literature: "Now he was working up the swift current of a long rapid like a bird in the teeth of the wind." (*Forest Neighbors* by William Davenport Hulbert.)

into the wind

"Into the wind" means against the wind or in the direction opposite to the direction the wind is blowing. This nautical expression is nearly the same as "in the teeth of the wind."

"Sailing into the wind" is an expression that refers to a sailboat's ability to

move forward despite being headed into (or very nearly into) the wind. The point of sail into the wind is called "close hauled."

In practice, optimal sailing in the direction from which the wind is coming will usually be at a course of 45-degree angles to the oncoming wind. To make headway, alternating the direction of the wind between the port and starboard side is usually necessary. This is called "tacking."

shouting into the wind

"Shouting into the wind" is an idiom commonly used to describe an unsuccessful attempt to communicate. But, according to acoustics researcher Ville Pulkki of Aalto University in Finland, it's not actually more difficult to shout upwind.

Sending a sound upwind, against the flow of air, makes the sound louder due to an acoustical effect called convective amplification. Sound sent downwind is quieter. So, if you're yelling upwind, a listener standing in front of you should have no problem hearing you, contrary to popular belief.

The misperception has a simple explanation, Pulkki says. "When you yell against the wind, you hear yourself worse." That's because, in this scenario, your ears are downwind of your mouth. That means your own voice sounds quieter to you.

Whichever way the wind blows, acoustics can explain it. So they say.

whistle down the wind

To "whistle down the wind" means to leave, abandon, or to slander a person.

The phrase derives from the earlier 'whistle away,' which meant 'dismiss or cast off.' This usage dates from at least the 1500s.

"Down the wind" comes from the sport of falconry. When hawks are released to hunt, they are sent upwind but, when turned loose for recreation, they are sent downwind. Thus, to "whistle someone/thing down the wind" is to cast it off to its own fate. Shakespeare alluded to this in *Othello* (1604). *Whistle Down the Wind* is also the title of a 1961 film.

spit into the wind

To spit into the wind is to do something totally pointless, fruitless, or futile; to waste one's time doing something that cannot succeed.

A more vulgar, but perhaps more common, version of this phrase is "pissing in the wind." It may be impolite to say, but it is amusing to imagine: whatever you expel will be blown straight back onto you.

twist in the wind

To twist in the wind means you have been left in a very difficult, troublesome, or problematic situation, often subjected to punishment or blame. "Slowly" can be added between "twist" and "in" for further emphasis. "You really left us twisting in the wind when you decided to take your vacation right before the project's deadline!"

It is also put as "leave twisting in the wind," meaning to abandon or strand in a difficult situation. This expression alludes to the corpse of a hanged man left dangling and twisting in the open air.

"Twisted" was slang for "hanged" in the 1700s. In modern times the phrase was initially used by John Ehrlichmann in 1973, when it was applied to President Nixon's withdrawal of support for his own nominee in the face of strong opposition, who was then left to "twist in the wind."

gone with the wind

The literal meaning of the phrase "gone with the wind" refers to something that is quickly and unpredictably swept away by the wind, making it impossible to hold onto or retrieve.

Figuratively, the phrase is used to describe something that has disappeared, passed, or vanished, permanently or completely. It was popularized by Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel of the same name, which alludes to the Civil War as having caused the disappearance of a Southern way of life. Mitchell received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for the book in 1937. It was adapted into the 1939 film of the same name, which is considered to be one of the greatest movies ever made and also received the Academy Award for Best Picture during the 12th annual Academy Awards ceremony.

"Gone with the wind" can be used to highlight the transient nature of the uncertainty that comes with change. Just as the wind can carry away something, the feeling of vulnerability can dissipate or be forgotten once the situation is resolved.

go with the wind

The idiom "go with the wind" represents a sense of flexibility. It implies that one should be able to adjust to changing circumstances and go with the flow. It suggests that remaining open-minded and adaptable is desirable when faced with uncertainty or vulnerability.

However, the idiom can also be applied to someone who is unpredictable or easily swayed by circumstances, lacking firmness or commitment. Wind itself is known for its unpredictable and ever-changing nature, making it a suitable metaphor for people who exhibit similar qualities.

"Go with the wind" originated from the popular novel and film *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell.

as the wind blows

"As the wind blows" means that how we look at the future depends on circumstances and luck. It's used to say that you will make a decision later, based on how a situation develops. For example, "Let's see which way the wind is blowing before I make my decision."

If the phrase is applied to a person, it suggests that the person's actions or behavior can change without warning, similar to how the wind changes direction or intensity. A similar idiom is "blow hot and cold," which describes someone's inconsistent behavior, shifting between extremes.

before the wind

"Before the wind" means in the same direction as the main force of the wind. This nautical phrase refers to the ease of sailing in the same direction as the wind and being propelled forward. Its figurative use, as in "to achieve something easily," dates from the mid-1800s.

It can also mean "with great haste" or "driven ahead" as might happen with the wind at one's back. For example, "Shirley is incredibly fast; she's always running before the wind."

under the wind

"Under the wind" means moving in the same direction as the wind, so as to travel farther or more quickly. This is chiefly a nautical phrase, though sometimes it's used in reference to golf. And it can also mean "to leeward," or in a place protected from the wind.

upwind

"Upwind" means in the direction from which the wind is blowing, or going against it.

downwind

"Downwind" means in the same direction as the wind is blowing, or going with it. "I was downwind from the camp and the odor of their soup drifted to me."

Sailing upwind means that your boat is pointing in the general direction the wind is coming from. Sailing downwind means you are pointed away from the direction wind is coming from; it is pushing you along.

have/get wind of

To "have or get wind of" is to learn of or hear about something, especially something being kept secret, through indirect means. Picture a gentle gust carrying whispers of gossip your way. "If the press gets wind of this, the campaign will be over."

The expression is an idiom that actually refers to hearing some gossip or information (normally about yourself) that was supposed to be a secret. "If my old aunt gets wind of it, she'll cut me off with a shilling." (William Makepeace Thackeray, in *Paris Sketch Book*, 1840).

The phrase derives from a couple of ancient occupations. One is hunting. The breeze can carry different scents that give away where the game might be. On the other hand, animals are able to smell hunters or other animals when they are some way off, because the smell is carried to them on the wind.

The other source for the phrase "get wind of" derives from the days when the main form of long-distance travel was the sea. The wind could carry the smell of land, other ships, or a storm coming, alerting sailors to something before they could see it.

have the wind in one's sails

To "have the wind in one's sails" means to be in a position of great success or good fortune, which can help generate further success by giving one confidence, optimism, and determination. For example, "After her promotion at work, Sally has the wind in her sails these days."

take the wind out of someone's sails

To "take the wind out of someone's sails" means to discourage that person greatly, to cause him or her to lose hope or the will to continue. For example, "It took the wind out of his sails to learn that nearly half of his bonus would go to taxes." It can also mean to destroy someone's advantage, to deflate someone's boasting or arrogance.

This term, which alludes to impeding a sailing vessel by sailing to windward of it and thereby robbing it of the wind, was used literally until about 1800. Sir Walter Scott used it figuratively in *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822).

trim one's sails

There are three definitions for "trim one's sails."
—Adjust the sails on a sailboat to take advantage of current wind conditions.
—To adapt oneself to new or altered circumstances.
—To spend less money, to decrease one's expenses.

"His advisors told him to trim his sails afore he alienated voters and bungled the acclamation completely."

The term began to be used in a figurative way by 1800 or so, but it's one we rarely hear today.

get (put) the wind up

To "get the wind up" means to become frightened or disturbed or anxious. To "put the wind up" somebody means to make that person frightened.

sail close to the wind

To "sail close to the wind" means to sail toward the direction from which the

wind is blowing. This term alludes to the danger incurred when literally sailing too close to (that is, in the direction of) the wind.

Figuratively, it means to be on the verge of doing something illegal or improper. For example, "She was sailing pretty close to the wind when she called him a liar."

The expression "close to the wind" has been known in sailing circles for centuries and was first recorded in Captain John Smith's training manual for sailors, *A Sea Grammar*, published in 1627.

If the wind were coming from the 12 o'clock direction, "close to the wind" might be around 10 o'clock or two o'clock. Going in those directions, the sails will be full and the ship will travel along briskly. However, just a small error in steering would point the ship directly into the wind, which will cause it to abruptly lose wind and speed. Thus "close to the wind" is exhilarating but risky.

In the figurative sense, which appeared in the nineteenth century, the phrase describes a situation where someone operates very close to the limits of what is acceptable or safe, especially in a legal or ethical context. It can also mean to come near the limits of danger or indecency.

have the wind knocked out of you

Sometimes, a strong blow to the chest or stomach can knock the wind out of you, meaning you will have difficulty breathing for a while.

Experiencing a shock or receiving some terrible news may also cause you to become breathless, feeling like you have had the wind knocked out of you. This is how we use the expression as an idiom. "Honestly, I had the wind knocked out of me when I heard about the accident."

sow the wind and reap the whirlwind

This proverb means that actions, especially foolish or reckless ones, will lead to significant negative consequences. Every decision has consequences and the phrase emphasizes the idea that what you do will come back to you, often in a much larger way. The expression originated in the Bible, in Hosea.

Today, we're more likely to express the idea with "what goes around comes around."

long-winded

The oldest meaning of "long-winded" is the ability to maintain breathing power for a long time during exertion. For example, a swimmer might be called long-winded.

The modern meaning, dating from the 1580s, is to talk or write at tedious, wearisome length. Thus, a long-winded explanation is one that uses many words when just a few would do. And the long-winded toasts at a wedding feast inevitably end in everyone's food getting cold before they can start eating it.

second wind

Getting your "second wind" means experiencing renewed energy after a period of fatigue, and applies to any kind of effort from physical exercise to mental gymnastics. For example, "After midnight the dancers seemed to get their second wind and went on till dawn."

The allusion here is to athletes who, after initial breathlessness, warm up and resume their regular breathing. In the early twentieth century this phenomenon was transferred to other kinds of undertakings in which, after an initial flagging of energy, one is able to continue with fresh vigor. Josephine Tey used it in *The Franchise Affair* (1946): "Perhaps it was the presence of an ally … or perhaps she had just got her second wind."

know which the way the wind blows

To "know which way the wind blows" is to know what appears likely to happen, how a certain course or situation is likely to develop. For example, "The politician is waiting to see the way the wind blows regarding public opinion on the issue before deciding how to take action."

For sailors, hunters, and farmers, knowing how the wind was blowing at any time was obviously important, and it's easy to see why the phrase came to be synonymous with skill and understanding.

The figurative sense of "the way the wind blows," that is, the tide of opinion, was in use by the early 1800s.

Bob Dylan's *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, 1965, encouraged the young to make their own decisions with the lines:

You don't need a weather man
To know which way the wind blows.

throw caution to the wind

When you "throw caution to the wind," you to do something without worrying about the risks or possibly negative consequences. The idiom suggests a daring, perhaps even reckless, attitude towards a particular task or situation. For example, "I just threw caution to the wind and bought myself a new car."

Similar expressions include "Taking a leap of faith," "Living on the edge," "Going all out," and "Burning bridges."

the winds of change

The phrase "the winds of change" represents an event or series of events that signals or precipitates large and important changes. For example, "A meeting between delegates for the two warring countries is leading some to speculate that the winds of change may be blowing through the region."

Such winds are trends or forces that have the power to change things, for example, "the winds of popular opinion."

the winds of war

The phrase "the winds of war" means something that disrupts or destroys.

The Winds of War is Herman Wouk's second book about World War II (the first being *The Caine Mutiny*). Published in 1971, *The Winds of War* was followed up seven years later by *War and Remembrance*, originally conceived as one volume. Wouk decided to break it into two volumes when he realized it took nearly 1,000 pages just to get to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The phrase perhaps became popular because of Wouk's book, but it would always be popular with those of us who love the rhythm of alliteration.

blowing a gale

If it's blowing a gale outside, the wind is very strong and blustery.

'Gale' is a technical term used on the Beaufort Scale to describe a strong wind

that reaches a speed roughly between 40 and 55 miles per hour. However, people use this word more freely to describe any kind of strong wind.

Forecasters typically issue gale warnings when winds of this strength are expected. In the US, a gale warning is specifically a maritime warning. The land-based equivalent is called a wind advisory.

the calm before the storm

The phrase "the calm before the storm" means a period of peace or quiet before a disturbance or activity. It's often used to mean an unnatural or false calm before a storm. For example, a figurative application is: "What the country was experiencing was not peace, but just the calm before another war."

The idiom is often used to describe a sense of foreboding, during a particularly serene period, that violence is on the way. "Fair weather brings on cloudy weather" is an ancient Greek proverb.

There is scientific truth behind the phrase's use. The weather in advance of a storm is indeed often calm and stable because the advancing storm is pulling warm, moist air out of the atmosphere, leaving a vacuum. We have probably all observed that right before a storm hits, everything suddenly becomes very quiet and calm. The birds stop chirping because they're busy looking for shelter; they know what's happening. A short while later clouds start rolling in.

Using fair and foul weather to describe human affairs is very old. "It is a common fault of men not to reckon on storms in fair weather," wrote Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513). In modern times the phrase frequently has been applied to an uneasy peacetime, when war seemed imminent. It was so used in the late 1930s.

bend with the wind

If you can "bend with the wind," you're able to adapt to the circumstances and flow with changes as opposed to breaking or snapping. It's the skill of being resilient during hard or turbulent times.

The phrase likely originated from observing that a tree that can bend is better able to withstand heavy winds.

breeze

A breeze is a baby wind.

All right, if you want a more specific definition, a breeze is a light current of air blowing at between 5 and 31 miles per hour, according to the Beaufort scale.

"A breeze" is also used to describe something, such as a task, that is easy to do. You can breeze through a math test, for example, finishing long before your classmates.

fan the breeze

"Fan the breeze" means the same thing as "shoot the breeze," to chat aimlessly or casually or to gossip.

However, *Green's Dictionary of Slang* lists the phrase as 1935 US slang meaning to escape from or to evade the law.

run like the wind

When you move or run like the wind, you move very swiftly.

"Swifter than the winds" appears as far back as the Roman poet Virgil's *Aeneid* and is echoed by numerous later writers. Another old expression, no longer heard, is "on the wings of the wind," which appears twice in the Book of Psalms.

windbag

"Windbag" may describe the flexible air-filled chamber of a bagpipe or the bellows for an organ, but it's more commonly used for a talkative person who says a lot but doesn't get to the point and what they say is of very little value.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Aeolus, ruler of the Aeolian islands and of the winds, presented Odysseus and his crew with a gift of the four winds in a bag. However, the sailors opened the bag while Odysseus slept, expecting to find something of value. As a result of this folly, the four winds escaped and the ship was blown off course by the resulting gale.

Oops.

beat the wind

To “beat the wind" means to keep doing something despite its apparent pointlessness or futility. This is very similar to "bang your head against a stone wall."

a candle in the wind

"A candle in the wind" is something that is vulnerable, fragile, or weak, and may fail, perish, or be eliminated at any moment.

Candle in the Wind is a ballad originally written in 1973 by English musician Elton John and songwriter Bernie Taupin in honor of Marilyn Monroe, who had died 11 years earlier. In 1997, John performed a rewritten version of the song as a tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales. In 2004, *Rolling Stone Magazine* listed the original version of the song as one of the 500 greatest songs of all time.

ill wind

An "ill wind" is a misfortune and is most commonly used in the phrase "it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good." Even the most negative or harmful situations usually benefit someone. For example, an El Niño year can bring much needed rain to some parts of the world, but catastrophic floods or droughts to other parts. Thus a situation that benefits no one must be truly bad (and rare).

Into the 20th century, we find a punning joke on the phrase that has been attributed to many people. This calls the notoriously difficult-to-play French horn "the wind that nobody blows good."

This joke was popularized by Danny Kaye's character in the 1947 film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, although in that version they opted for the tuneful but also difficult oboe:

> And the oboe, it is clearly understood,
> Is an ill wind that no one blows good.

a willow in the wind

Being "a willow" in the wind can be used to mean two different things. Either

you're a person who easily changes what they believe in depending on what other people say, or else you're simply adaptable and open-minded.

The phrase originates from the image of a willow tree bending and swaying in the wind, symbolizing vulnerability or flexibility.

windbreak

A windbreak is usually a planting of trees or shrubs, but may also be fences, earth berms, walls, and perennial or annual crops and grasses. Such shelters serve primarily to protect soils, crops, livestock, wildlife, people, and structures from wind stress and wind damage. In addition, windbreaks can create habitat for wild organisms, including pollinators, and can provide shade to livestock or foster microclimates for the cultivation of certain crops, among other benefits.

If designed properly, windbreaks around a home can reduce the cost of heating and cooling and save energy. Windbreaks are also planted to help keep snow from drifting onto roadways or yards. Farmers sometimes use windbreaks to keep snow drifts on farm land so as to provide water when the snow melts in the spring.

A further use for a windbreak or shelterbelt is to screen a farm from a main road or motorway. This improves the view and reduces traffic noise.

Fences called "windbreaks" are also used. Normally made from cotton, nylon, canvas, and recycled sails, windbreaks tend to have three or more panels held in place with poles that slide into pockets sewn into the panel. The poles are then hammered into the ground and a windbreak is formed. Windbreaks or "wind fences" are used to reduce wind speeds over erodible areas such as open fields, industrial stockpiles, and dusty industrial operations.

Sheltered, windless areas created by windbreaks are called wind shadows.

And "windbreaker?" A windbreaker is a thin outer coat designed to resist wind chill and light rain. The word was used to create a trademark in 1914.

tilting at windmills

"Tilting at windmills" means engaging in conflict with an imagined opponent or, figuratively, using time and energy to attack an enemy or problem that is not real. This metaphor alludes to the hero of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), who rides with his lance at full tilt (poised to strike) against a

row of windmills, which he mistakes for evil giants.

The novel recounts the exploits of would-be knight Don Quixote and his loyal servant Sancho Panza, who propose to fight injustice through chivalry. (Tilting means jousting.) It is considered one of the major literary masterpieces and remains a best seller in numerous translations.

The book also gave us the adjective "quixotic" (striving for visionary ideals).

quick bites

sure as the wind blows — certainly, without a doubt
out of the wind — sheltered
out of wind — out of breath, winded
off the wind — with the wind at one's back
on (close to) the wind — facing the wind
gales of laughter — loud outbursts of laughter
break wind — expel gases generated during digestion, fart
a capful of wind — a sudden gust of wind or a light breeze

11 – Speedy Gonzales

speedy

"Speedy" is an adjective meaning quick, rapid, swift, or super fast. The first known use of the word is in the 1300s.

Anything that's speedy moves rapidly, whether it's a bullet train or a waiter bringing coffee before you've even finished ordering it. The Old English root of speedy is *spedig*, which oddly means "wealthy." A now old-fashioned meaning of "speed," in fact, was "success" or "prosperity."

Speedy Gonzales is an animated cartoon character in the Warner Bros. *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies* series of cartoons. He is portrayed as "The Fastest Mouse in all Mexico" with his major traits being the ability to run extremely fast, and display a quick wit.

"Speedy," of course, is a popular name for many commercial enterprises.

go like sixty

To "go like sixty" is to go very fast. For example, "Everyone was working like sixty to finish up before the holidays."

Originally, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to do something "like sixty" meant doing it with great force or vigor rather than in a hurry. The *OED* then refers us to the earlier phrase "like forty," popular since the late 17th century, meaning "with great force." It appears that "like sixty" is just an inflated version of "like forty," and didn't, at least originally, have anything to do with speed.

Most people believe the idiom relates to cars or trains, which appears to make sense, but is not true. It wasn't until 1848 that the Boston and Main Railroad had an authenticated average speed of 60 miles per hour.

fast as greased lightning

If you're as fast as greased lightning, you're incredibly quick or speedy. You're like a blue streak or like the wind.

Lightning has a reputation for being fast. According to *The Measure of Things*, a lightning bolt can travel around 217,000 mph. That's not nearly as fast as light, though, which travels at around 670,000,000 mph.

Lubricants like oil and grease are used to make machinery run smoother and faster. So, the idea here is that grease is being figuratively applied to lightning in order to make it go even faster.

This expression was first used in an English newspaper in the year 1833 to describe someone who spoke very quickly. Before this, lightning had already been used to describe fast things, and "greased" was added as an intensifier.

faster than …

The English language has many idioms to express things related to speed. Here's a detailed look at some of them that are "faster than …."

Faster than a greased pig:
This is so fast that nobody can stop you or catch you. Greased pig catching or pig scrambles occur at agricultural shows in the USA and country fairs in the UK. Pigs are greased with lard or cooking oil and released into an area for competitors to catch. They move swiftly as they don't want to be caught and are very difficult to hold onto.

Faster than you can say Jack Robinson:
This saying first appears in print in the 1770s in both English and Scottish writing. One theory is that it came from a certain Jack Robinson who was Lieutenant of The Tower of London in the 1660s. He was said to be quite hasty in executing people. Another idea is that it came from a 1700s London socialite. This Jack or John Robinson was renowned for very short visits. It was said that his visits were so short that it seemed he was leaving as he arrived.

Faster than a rat up a drainpipe:
This phrase originated in Australia sometime in the 1960s, apparently from the observation that a rat scurries very quickly up and into drainpipes as it tries to flee danger.

Faster than a speeding bullet:
This was first used to describe Superman on a 1940s radio broadcast in the USA. Some of the fastest bullets travel at more than 1800 miles per hour.

Faster than a New York minute:

As Johnny Carson once said, it's the interval between a Manhattan traffic light turning green and the guy behind you honking his horn. It appears to have originated in Texas around 1967 and refers to the frenzied and hectic pace of New Yorkers' lives.

Faster than a knife fight in a phone booth:
Such a fight would be very unpredictable and chaotic. Combat with sharp blades in such close quarters is bound to end in no time at all.

Faster than a prairie fire with a tailwind:
In dry weather, prairie grass can catch fire and quickly burn out of control. A tailwind is a wind that is blowing in the same direction that something is traveling. Thus, a prairie fire with a tailwind will move and spread exceptionally quickly.

Faster than the blink of an eye:
The actual speed of an eye blink is close to one-third of a second.

Faster than a bat out of hell:
This phrase first became popular amongst British WWI pilots. They no doubt flew fast and erratically to avoid being shot down. Presumably bats escaping from hell fly that way.

Faster than the speed of light:
So far as we are aware, that's impossible.

Faster than a politician changes his mind:
That's impossible, too.

fast talk

To "fast talk" someone is to persuade or mislead with a smooth line of talk. People speak like this when they want you to take action quickly without thinking too much about the decision. For example, "That door-to-door salesman fast-talked me into purchasing a ton of things I didn't need."

Then, there's the way auctioneers talk when they're selling things. There's a kind of urgency to it, which I suppose encourages people to feel as if they have to hurry and buy things before someone else does. The speed is an urge to action.

Used as a noun, however, the phrase "fast talk" can simply describe someone's normal way of speaking. According to psychologists, the average person speaks at a rate of about 150 words per minute, but rapid speakers can easily

double or even triple that number.

Fast talking can also be the result of various anxieties. When we're worried about how others perceive us, we might subconsciously try to minimize the time we're the center of attention by speaking quickly. For others, ideas flow so quickly that their speech accelerates to match the pace of their thoughts.

gabble

To "gabble" means to speak rapidly or incoherently, to jabber. It was recorded as long ago as 1577, meaning to talk fast or foolishly.

The word was likely created to resemble the rapid cackling noises made by geese or ducks.

live life in the fast lane

Someone who "lives life in the fast lane" has an energetic and exciting lifestyle and is often involved in risky or high-pressure activities.

The idiom originated in the world of transportation, particularly in the context of highways and roads. The term itself is a metaphor that likens a fast-paced and high-stakes lifestyle to driving in the lane designated for higher speeds on a multilane highway.

The expression became popular after The Eagles' song, *Life in the Fast Lane*, was released in 1976. The song's lyrics describe a hedonistic and intense lifestyle, and the phrase "life in the fast lane" quickly caught on.

As a solitary writer, sitting at my desk and sipping coffee, my life is so slow that I don't even use the highway. I'm the one walking on the sidewalk. And enjoying the scenery.

stand fast

When used as an adverb, "fast" can mean "quickly," but it can also mean "securely." It's from this last meaning that we get the idiom "stand fast," which can also be said as "stand firm." It means to remain determined, stalwart, and unyielding, as in one's position or opinion.

"We must stand fast against increased taxation."

make fast work of

To "make fast work of" something means dealing with it very quickly. It can mean defeating someone easily and also eating something quickly. For example, "You made fast work of that pizza!"

fast track

The phrase "fast track" can be used in several ways:
—a course leading to rapid advancement, as in a career
—a course that leads to early consideration or review
—a race track with optimum conditions for high speeds
—as a verb, to speed up processing to meet a goal

The origin of the idiom can be traced back to the early 20th century, when it was first used in the context of railway construction. The term referred to a dedicated and efficient rail line that allowed trains to travel at higher speeds, thus expediting the transportation of goods and passengers.

Examples of the idiom "fast track" can be found in almost every field.

12 – Brainwork

political correctness

"Political correctness" is a doctrine, fostered by a delusional, illogical minority, and rabidly promoted by an unscrupulous mainstream media, which holds forth the proposition that it is entirely possible to pick up a turd by the clean end.

Dictionaries, which are generally more polite, define it as "a belief that language should be inclusive and avoid offense or disadvantage to members of particular groups in society." However, another dictionary definition is: "An effort to distort reality through vocabulary." So, depending on who is speaking, "politically correct" can mean cowardly or courageous, hypersensitive or distorted, orthodox or ridiculous, or simply linguistic jujitsu.

Why can't we just call things what they are?

The term "political correctness" first appeared in Marxist–Leninist vocabulary following the Russian Revolution of 1917. At that time, it was used to describe strict adherence to the policies and principles of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that is, the party line. Many described it as a form of censorship. It was very much the kind of thing Orwell tried to convey with his notion of Newspeak in *1984*: to make it impossible to talk, and possibly even think, about ideas that challenge the established order.

The problems with policing speech are:
—the determination of what is offensive
—who decides what is offensive
—choosing what language should be eliminated
Then we must ask whether language should be prohibited on the basis of one person being offended, a certain percentage of people taking offense, or simply decided by those in political power. Offensiveness is a matter of opinion.

This is the crux of the problem. Political correctness seeks to put boundaries on offensive speech and behavior. However, there is the risk that such boundaries are likely to be determined by the personal beliefs and values of those in power. This means that the definition of what is offensive can change with each group that comes into power.

In May 1991, at a commencement ceremony for a graduating class of the University of Michigan, then U.S. President George H. W. Bush used the term in his speech: "The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudices with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expressions off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits."

Political correctness is less about solving problems than imposing censorship and intellectual intimidation, and demonstrating the moral purity of those who impose it.

Political correctness means avoiding language and actions that insult, exclude or harm people who are already experiencing disadvantage and discrimination. But supposing we don't intend to insult, exclude, or harm anyone? I was once reprimanded for saying that my sister was blind. But "blind" was the word she used for herself. And the politically correct term, "sight impaired," was inaccurate. Her sight wasn't impaired; it was totally non-existent.

Freedom of speech gives people the right to say what they feel, but it also gives other people the right to say they are offended. Freedom of speech doesn't mean your words can't be criticized; it just means you can't be silenced. And that's the way it should be. After all, there are no laws that say anybody has to listen to you.

A related term, "cultural appropriation," assumes that if I write about another culture, say the Cree Nation, I'm depriving Cree Nation members of the ability to speak or write about their community. But this is wrong. The fact that I write a story about the Cree doesn't stop any member of that Nation from writing stories. No one is being forced to read my stories or their stories.

So, let's have a look (and possibly a laugh) at some politically correct terms. In the following lists, the normal term is first, and the so-called politically correct term is second.

For the feminists:
forefathers — ancestors
manhole — maintenance hole
mankind — humankind
man-made — artificial
man in the street — average person
sportsmanship — fairness
tax man — tax officer

Occupations:
secretary — administrative assistant
waiter, waitress — server
cleaner — facility manager
hairdresser — stylist
prostitute — sex worker

Race:
black sheep — pariah
blackboard — chalk board
blacklisted — banned
blackmail — extortion

Problems:
cripple -— person with a disability
deaf — hearing impaired
diabetic — person with diabetes
drug addict — person with a chemical dependency
drug habit — substance use disorder
poor — marginalised
promiscuous — sexually liberated (or just horny?)
schizoid, mad — person with a mental health disability
slum — economically deprived area

People:
broken home — dysfunctional family
illegal alien — undocumented worker
midget / dwarf — little person
nut — person with a mental health condition (or possibly an almond)
old people — senior citizens
pregnant woman — pregnant person (This last one defies fact. Women become pregnant. Men don't and can't. This is a basic fact of biology for mammals, which you can find in any elementary biology textbook, if you didn't happen to take the subject in school.)

The ridiculous:
able-bodied — non-disabled
bald — follically challenged
boring — differently interesting
clumsy — uniquely coordinated
dead — terminally unavailable
get the sack — be part of a restructuring
homeless — residentially flexible
idiot — behaviorally challenged
juvenile delinquents — children at risk

lost — geographically disorientated
mentally handicapped — intellectually disabled
minority group — numerically challenged group
prison cell — custody suite
problem — opportunity or challenge
short — vertically challenged
to lie — to be economical with the truth
unemployed — involuntarily leisured
used (goods) — pre-owned or pre-loved (are the goods going to be offended?)
wrong — differently logical

nature versus nurture

Are we born with our personality characteristics, or do we become who we are because of the world around us? The "nature versus nurture" debate in psychology centers on such questions. It asks whether genetics, environmental factors, or a combination of both are responsible for all of our unique behaviors, traits, and quirks.

"Nature" refers largely to our genetics. It includes the genes we are born with and other hereditary factors that can impact how our personality is formed and influence the way that we develop from childhood through adulthood.

"Nurture" encompasses the environmental factors that impact who we are. This includes our early childhood experiences, the way we were raised, our social relationships, and the surrounding culture.

The view that humans acquire all or almost all their behavioral traits from "nurture" was termed "tabula rasa" (blank slate) by John Locke in 1690. A blank slate view in human developmental psychology, which assumes that human behavioral traits develop almost exclusively from environmental influences, was widely held during much of the 20th century. Such views are now seen as naive or outdated.

Close feedback loops have been found in which nature and nurture influence one another constantly. Instead of defending extreme nativist or nurturist views, most psychological researchers are now interested in investigating how nature and nurture interact in a host of qualitatively different ways.

see the light

If you "see the light," you suddenly understand something you didn't understand before. The phrase can also be used in the sense of coming to

public notice. "His book never saw the light." Yet another meaning is to foresee an end to one's problems after a long period of time, in which case, the phrase can expand to "see light at the end of the tunnel." The term, dating from the late 1600s, originally referred to religious conversion, the light meaning "true religion."

have an inkling

To "have an inkling" means to have a vague notion, a hint, a whisper, or a clue.

In the 13th century, when the word was coined, you didn't "have" an inkling, you "heard" one. Inklings were small sounds. So, if you heard an inkling that sounded like your name, your senses were alerted to listening for something that might interest you.

Inkling comes from Middle English *yngkiling*, meaning "whisper or mention," and perhaps further back from the verb *inclen*, meaning "to hint at." An early sense of the word meant "a faint perceptible sound or undertone" or "rumor."

A related word is the rare verb inkle, a back-formation of inkling that in some British English dialects can mean "to utter or communicate in an undertone or whisper, to hint, give a hint of" or "to have an idea or notion of." Inkle is also a noun referring to a colored linen tape or braid woven on a very narrow loom and used for trimming.

In the 13th century you would have had a ninkling rather than an inkling. Inkling is one of those nouns that were originally spelled with an 'n' at the start of the word but later lost it in everyday speech. In this case, sometime in the 16th century, 'a ninkling' became 'an inkling.' Other examples of this are 'a napron' and 'a nadder' [snake].

second nature

Something that is "second nature" to you is a mindset, skill, or type of behavior so ingrained through habit or practice that it seems natural, automatic, or without a basis in conscious thought. You find it easy to do without really thinking about it. For example, "The new computer program is now second nature to me!"

This concept is very old. "Custom is second nature" is how it was put by Plutarch, Montaigne, and other early writers, but it appeared in English at first only in translations of this proverb. The modern usage dates from the early

1900s. In *The Confidential Clerk* (1954), T. S. Eliot wrote "I do feel more at ease … behind a desk. It's second nature."

method to one's madness

If you have a method to your madness, you have a specific, rational purpose in what you're doing or planning, even though it may appear crazy or absurd to another person. The phrase originated in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it."

thick as two short planks

"Thick as two short planks" means to be remarkably stupid, dimwitted, or obtuse. Similar expressions are "thick as a plank" and "thick as a brick."

"Thick" has been used to mean slow-witted or stupid since the 17th century. In this phrase, 'thick' does double duty. It refers to the obvious lack of brains in a piece of wood and also to another meaning, 'short and wide.' Planks of wood are wide and the shorter they are the greater their apparent thickness. Two short planks, then, are even thicker.

Shakespeare used "thick" in *Henry IV, Part. 2*, (1600): "…his wit's as thicke as Tewksbury mustard." Tewksbury mustard was made from ground English mustard seeds and horseradish and formed into a thick, creamy ball. Apparently, it is still available in Tewksbury and elsewhere in the UK.

dunce

A "dunce" is a stupid person.

It is ironic that "dunce" is derived from the name of one of the most brilliant thinkers of the Middle Ages, John Duns Scotus. So ingenious were the theological and metaphysical speculations of this amazing man that he was given the name "the Subtle Doctor." However, in the 1500s, his followers became a conservative element in English universities, and they tended to resist the new learning of humanism. As a result, "dunsman" and the shortened form "duns" (later spelled dunce) became terms of scorn, first meaning “pedant” and gradually taking on the modern sense "slow-witted person."

writing

According to historians, "writing" had its origins in the counting, cataloguing, and trade of agricultural produce. Government tax rolls followed thereafter.

No surprise there!

The earliest form of writing was pictographs (cuneiform) — symbols which represented objects — and served to aid in remembering such things as which parcels of grain had gone to which destination or how many sheep were needed for sacrifices in the temples. These pictographs were impressed, with reed instruments, onto wet clay, which was then dried, and these became official records of commerce. As beer was a very popular beverage in ancient Mesopotamia, many of the earliest records extant have to do with the sale of beer. With pictographs, one could tell how many jars or vats of beer were involved in a transaction but not necessarily what that transaction meant. As the historian Kriwaczek notes:

"All that had been devised thus far was a technique for noting down things, items and objects, not a writing system. A record of 'Two Sheep Temple God Inanna' tells us nothing about whether the sheep are being delivered to, or received from, the temple, whether they are carcasses, or live, or anything else about them."

Around 3200 BCE, pictograms, though still in use, gave way to phonograms — symbols which represented sounds — and those sounds were the spoken language of the people of Sumer. With phonograms, one could more easily convey precise meaning and so, in the example of the two sheep and the temple of Inanna, one could now make clear whether the sheep were going to or coming from the temple, whether they were living or dead, and what role they played in the life of the temple.

Writing was independently invented multiple times. Four independent inventions of writing are most commonly recognized—in Mesopotamia (c. 3400–3100 BCE), Egypt (c. 3250 BCE), China (before c. 1250 BCE), and Mesoamerica (before c. 1 CE).

Writing was naturally of political importance and literacy was concentrated among an educated elite of scribes. Only people from certain backgrounds were allowed to train as scribes in the service of temple, royal, and military authorities.

The common materials in the early writing world were clay tablets and papyrus rolls. The tablets of the Chaldeans are small pieces of clay, somewhat crudely shaped into a form resembling a pillow, and thickly inscribed with cuneiform characters. Similar use has been seen in hollow cylinders, or prisms of six or eight sides, formed of fine terracotta, sometimes glazed, on which the

characters were traced with a small stylus, in some specimens so minutely as to require the aid of a magnifying glass.

In Egypt, monuments depict the use of wooden tablets for writing as early as the 4th millennium BCE. The papyrus reed grew chiefly in Lower Egypt—its pith was extracted and divided into thin pieces that were flattened under pressure and glued together. By adjoining other strips at right angles, papyrus rolls of any length could be produced.

Egyptian papyrus was exported across the world, and ultimately became the subject of great demand. When it became costly, it was replaced by other materials including leather and parchment. With the invention of wood-pulp paper, the cost of writing material began to steadily decline.

The oldest surviving literary texts date from a full millennium after the invention of writing. The earliest literary author known by name is Enheduanna, who authored a number of works, including *Exaltation of Inanna*, in the Sumerian language during the 24th century BCE. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a notable early poem.

Writing in China developed from divination rites using oracle bones c. 1200 BCE. The ancient Chinese practice of divination involved etching marks on bones or shells which were then heated until they cracked. The cracks would then be interpreted by a Diviner. If that Diviner had etched 'Next Tuesday it will rain' and 'Next Tuesday it will not rain' the pattern of the cracks on the bone or shell would tell him which would be the case. In time, these etchings evolved into the Chinese script.

Writing records the lives of a people and so is the first necessary step in the written history of a culture or civilization. But a problem is the difficulty scholars have in translating the language symbols. In early days, they could not read the glyphs of the Maya and so wrongly interpreted much of the physical evidence they excavated. Also, the Linear A script of the ancient Minoan culture of Crete (1850 to 1450 BCE) has yet to be understood. The same could be said of a good many of today's signatures.

cursive

"Cursive" is a style of writing in which all the letters in a word are connected. It's also known as script, or longhand, or "joined-up writing." Formal cursive is generally joined, but casual cursive is a combination of joins and pen lifts. The writing style can be further defined as "looped," "italic," or "connected."

Cursive comes from the past participle of the Latin word *currere,* which

means "to run." It's used generally for the purpose of making writing faster, in contrast to block letters, though more elaborate or ornamental calligraphic styles of writing can be slower to produce. In cursive handwriting, the letters all run into one another and the hand runs across the page, never lifting between letters. Signatures on documents are written in this flowing style.

The cursive method was developed for writing speed and infrequent pen-lifting to accommodate the limitations of the quill. Quill pens are fragile, easily broken, and will spatter unless used properly. Cursive writing was used in English before the Norman conquest of 1066. A cursive handwriting style —secretary hand—was widely used for both personal correspondence and official documents in England from early in the 1500s.

By the 2010s, the teaching of cursive was being taken out of the schools. But it is now coming back into use in many areas. As one nurse said, "I pay attention to the clarity of my writing because it is important to my job. Pharmacists and nurses have to be able to read prescriptions and physicians' orders, and it's not always easy." She adds, "We're still not a paperless society. Not 100 percent of documents are typed out. Writing still happens, and it still needs to be taught and understood."

There are other reasons for teaching cursive. For example, many historical documents, such as the US Constitution, are written in cursive. If you can't write it, how can you possibly read it? What about wedding invitations? Your grandfather's old letters you find in the attic?

Students with dyslexia, who have difficulty learning to read because their brains have difficulty associating sounds and letter combinations efficiently, have found that cursive can help them with the decoding process because it integrates hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, and other brain and memory functions.

One young man had to seek help in learning how to write his own name in cursive, to actually write his signature. He knew he would have to sign his selective service application when he turned 18. He was finishing high school that year and was unable to sign his own name.

As the nurse quoted above said, "My daughter couldn't wait to learn to write her name in the same flowing script I use. Kids are using keyboards and tablets earlier than ever before, and they're not focusing on writing by hand as a way to convey ideas. But advances in technology doesn't mean that writing isn't still a crucial stepping stone in basic communication. She's the only one of her friends who can sign her name. And that's a shame."

One teacher says, "In the hierarchy of crucial 21st-century skills, developing

creativity, initiative, and problem-solving are more important than learning to write in cursive."

Of course! They always have been. But that does not negate the usefulness of cursive.

penmanship

The Palmer Method of "penmanship" instruction was developed and promoted in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It soon became the most popular handwriting system in the US. Under this method, students were taught to adopt a uniform system of cursive writing with rhythmic motions.

Palmer's method involved "muscle motion" in which the more proximal muscles of the arm were used for movement, rather than allowing the fingers to move in writing. This textbook enjoyed great success: in 1912, one million copies were sold throughout the US.

Proponents of the Palmer Method emphasized its plainness and speed, saying that it was much faster than the laborious Spencerian Method, and that it allowed the writer to compete effectively with the typewriter. To educators, the method's advocates emphasized regimentation, and that the method would thus be useful in schools to increase discipline and character, and could even reform delinquents.

Never underestimate the imagination of advertising geniuses!

The Palmer Method was eventually supplanted by the Zaner-Bloser Method, which sought to teach children print writing (also called "manuscript printing") before teaching them cursive, in order to provide them with a means of written expression as soon as possible, and thus develop writing skills. The D'Nealian Method, introduced in 1978, sought to address problems raised by the Zaner-Bloser Method, returning to a more cursive style of print writing.

In British Columbia between 1921 and 1965, handwriting was influenced, if not permanently formed, by Mr. H.B. MacLean. His student compendiums and teacher's manual were on the authorized lists all that time. Children learned to make ovals, loops and lines on a slant, and to be careful to hold their arms and hands so that their fingers could glide on the paper.

Pupils wrote endless versions of the MacLean maxim, "Practice makes perfect." They also scribbled countless times a sentence famous for including all 26 letters: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." I practiced this

same sentence on the typewriter when I took typing in high school.

The *Vancouver Sun* celebrated the educator in an editorial. "Toward the end of his life the Method fell into some disuse, criticized for being too regimented, too opposed to individualism."

Perhaps. But it seems to me that you have to learn the "rules" before you can learn how to break them. And we are sufficiently individual that I have no doubt a handwriting expert can differentiate between two "MacLean" signatures.

read

The word "read" is used in a variety of ways. It's a very important word, since it is how we interpret writing.

As a verb, "to read" has the following meanings:
—comprehend letters or symbols by sight or touch
—to infer meaning: "interpret letters or symbols"
—to render writing in speech: "read to a child"
—comprehend speech by watching the lips: "lip-read"
—take note of actions to anticipate results: "read the weather"
—predict the future: "read tea leaves"
—interpret outward signs: "read a person's expressions"
—hear and understand: "I read you loud and clear."
—study (a subject), as at a university
—(of an actor) to audition: "read aloud from a script"
—to check for errors: "proofread"
—clarifying a description: "a friendly, read nosy, coworker"

Used in other ways:
—(noun) something that is read: "Her novel is a good read."
—(adjective) having knowledge gained from books: "well-read"

Idioms:
—read between the lines: "detect an unexpressed meaning"
—read someone's lips: "accept the truth of someone's statements"
—read a lecture: "issue a reprimand"
—read out of: "expel by proclamation from a group"
—read the riot act:
    order a mob to disperse
    order or warn to cease something
    reprimand severely

English is the one of the few western European languages that does not derive the verb "to read" from Latin *legere*. Compare, for example, *leggere* in Italian, *lire* in French, and *lesen* in German. Equally surprising is the fact that English is the only western European language which does not derive the verb for "to write" from Latin *scrībere*. Read comes from the Old English verb *rǣdan*, "to advise, interpret (something difficult), to interpret (something written), to read." The Old English noun *rǣd*, meaning "counsel," survives in the rare noun *rede*, "counsel, advice" and in the name of the unfortunate King Ethelred the Unready, whose epithet is often misunderstood. Unready here does not have its current sense of "unprepared." It is a late 16th-century spelling of an earlier *unredy*, meaning "ill-advised, rash, foolish," from *rede*.

The history of reading dates back to the invention of writing during the 4th millennium BCE. Although reading print text is now an important way to access information, this has not always been the case. Very few people were literate before the Industrial Revolution. Pre-modern societies with generally high literacy rates included classical Athens and the Islamic caliphate.

Reading is generally an individual activity, done silently, although on occasion a person reads out loud for other listeners or for personal reasons. Before the reintroduction of separated text (spaces between words) in the late Middle Ages, the ability to read silently was considered rather remarkable.

As reading became a largely silent activity, some people in 18th-century Europe raised concerns that reading in bed presented various dangers, such as fires caused by bedside candles. Some modern critics speculate that these concerns were rooted partially in fear that readers — especially women — would shirk obligations to family and community and even transgress moral boundaries via the private fantasy afforded by books.

The Industrial Revolution brought technological improvements in printing and paper production. New distribution networks enabled by improved roads and rail helped increase the demand for reading matter. Besides this, wider schooling rates along with increasing literacy rates helped boost a new mass market for printed material. The arrival of gas and electric lighting in private homes meant that reading after dark no longer had to take place by oil lamp or with those dangerous candles.

Reading became more important in the 1800s. Public notes, broadsides, catchpennies, and printed songs became common street literature, informing and entertaining the public before newspapers became readily available. Advertisements and local news, such as offers of rewards for catching criminals or for the return of stolen goods, appeared on public notices and handbills, while cheaply printed broadsheets covered political or criminal news such as murders, trials, executions, disasters, and rescues.

Reading isn't simple, however. For educators and researchers, it's a multifaceted process involving such areas as word recognition, orthography (spelling), alphabetics, phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and motivation.

In order to understand a text, it is necessary to understand the spoken language associated with that text. Once established, writing systems on the whole change more slowly than their spoken counterparts, and often preserve features and expressions which are no longer current in the spoken language. The great benefit of writing systems is their ability to maintain a record of information expressed in a language.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the use of audiobooks for reading has become increasingly popular. Audiobooks are seen by many as a continuation of oral tradition as well as an accessibility measure for the visually impaired. The popularity of audiobooks is possibly due to technological advances that make such materials widely available for download, often through public libraries.

Advocates of speed reading claim that you can increase reading speed without reducing comprehension or retention. Methods include skimming or the chunking of words in a body of text to increase the rate of reading. However, cognitive neuroscientists such as Stanislas Dehaene and Mark Seidenberg say that claims of reading up to 1,000 words per minute 'must be viewed with skepticism' and that 'people are as likely to read thousands of words per minute as they are to run faster than the speed of light.'

The average speaking speed of adults, based on scientific studies, is determined to be 183 words per minute. The average silent reading speed of adults is estimated at 238 words per minute.

Speed reading could be compared, perhaps, to driving a Ferrari on an open road. With my brain, though, reading is like driving an ancient Volkswagen on a bumpy gravel road. I enjoy reading, so I slow down and enjoy the way the words are put together.

Reading and writing cannot be separated. Reading is breathing in; writing is breathing out.

wit

Like several other short, old words, "wit" plays several roles in the language.

As a noun, it can mean:

—knowledge
—a natural ability to perceive and understand
—shrewdness or resourcefulness
—sound mental faculties, sanity
—humor, especially when clever or quick
—a person noted for humor, especially in conversation
—intelligent playfulness or humor in expression
—a person of exceptional intelligence

As a verb, it can mean:
—to be or become aware of, learn
—to know, be aware of (archaic)

Idioms:
—at one's wit's end: "utterly at a loss"
—keep one's wits: "remain alert, especially in a crisis"
—to wit: "That is to say; namely"
—brevity is the soul of wit: "conciseness is essential"
—gather one's wits: "think clearly and rationally"
—mother wit: "common sense"
—native wit: "common sense"
—scare out of one's wits: "frighten into panic"
—live by one's wits: "be an opportunist"

We most often think of "wit" as a biting or acid type of humor. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it as: "the ability to relate seemingly disparate things so as to amuse, a talent for banter." It can also mean astuteness, or refer to the five senses. "Alone and warming his five wits, the white owl in the belfry sits—" (Alfred Tennyson)

Wikipedia says wit is a form of intelligent humor—the ability to say or write things that are clever and typically funny. It includes sharp comebacks, clever banter, and dry, one-line jokes. It is often cynical or insulting, providing its characteristic sharpness.

Wit, humor, irony, sarcasm, satire, and repartee describe modes of expression intended to arouse amusement:
—Wit evokes laughter by remarks showing verbal felicity or ingenuity and swift perception, especially of the incongruous. "A playful wit."
—Humor is the ability to perceive the ludicrous, the comical, and the absurd in human life and to express these, usually without bitterness. "A sense of humor."
—Irony intends a meaning opposite of what is seemingly expressed.
—Sarcasm, frequently in the form of irony, is intended to cut or wound.
—Satire applies to writing that exposes or ridicules conduct, doctrines, or

institutions either by direct criticism or more often through irony, parody, or caricature.
—Repartee implies the power of answering quickly, pointedly, or wittily. "Snappy comeback, retort."

The following story is probably the single most frequently cited example of wit: Winston Churchill was once at a party, apparently quite drunk, when he had an encounter with a high-class socialite from another political party. The woman turned her nose up at Churchill and said with disdain, "You, sir, are drunk." Churchill, not missing a beat, responded in a dry tone of voice, "You, madam, are ugly, and in the morning I shall be sober."

For the Spartan warriors of ancient Greece, wit was considered to be as essential as physical skill. Young boys would practice hurling clever insults at each other during their military training, and the wittiest among them would often be rewarded just like the strongest and bravest. In battle, the Spartans were renowned for outwitting their opponents in addition to outfighting them, as seen in the movie *300*, where a Persian emissary threatens that a group of Spartan soldiers would be obliterated if they stood up to the Persian army: "Our arrows," he said, "will blot out the sun." An unknown Spartan soldier is said to have smirked in reply, saying, "Good! Then we shall fight in the shade."

In literature, wit is just fun to read. We tend to admire wit and find it charming, so wittiness is a great quality for a hero to have — it shows that he/she is not only a brave fighter, but also has a powerful mind. In addition, this emphasis on humor can help show how level-headed the hero is in the face of danger. Where many of us would be panicking or running away, the heroes stand their ground and also have the presence of mind to come up with a witty remark at the same time. A rare breed!

William Shakespeare was considered extremely witty in his time, though some of the humor doesn't translate very well to a modern reader. Still, we can easily recognize the cleverness of lines like this: "Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once." (William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)

13 – Oddballs

23 Skidoo

23 Skidoo is an American slang phrase meaning "Go away – scram." The phrase combines two earlier expressions, "twenty-three" (1899) and "skidoo" (1901), both of which, independently, referred to leaving, being kicked out, or the end of something.

Skidoo-wagon (also "skidoodle wagon" and "skedaddle wagon") was a short-lived euphemism for automobiles during 1904–1905.

The exact origin of the phrase is uncertain but there are numerous competing theories. Here are three of them:

1. In a theatrical production of Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, hero Sidney Carton is No. 23 of a multitude executed by the guillotine. The only recognition afforded Carton as he meets his fate is an old woman sitting at the foot of the guillotine, calmly saying 'twenty-three' as he is beheaded. 'Twenty-three' quickly became a popular catchphrase among the theater community in the early twentieth century, often used to mean, "It's time to leave while the getting is good."

2. The word came from an expression that construction workers used while building the Flatiron Building on 23rd Street in N.Y.C. This street is like an uninterrupted wind-tunnel between the East and Hudson Rivers. At intersections, pedestrians can experience a sudden blast of wind as soon as they pass the wall of a corner building. Apparently, when the workers sat on the sidewalk to eat their lunches, they would watch women's skirts blow up from the sudden gusts. In those days, the sight of female legs was something to write home about.

3. Another explanation is that the early 1900s mining town of Skidoo, California needed a water line run from the source of water on Telescope Peak to the town — a distance of 23 miles. It was a difficult task because of the immensely hard rock along the course, but was eventually accomplished by a determined engineer. The term "23 Skidoo" was then used as a statement of irony, something like "duck soup," a reference to something apparently easy, but actually very difficult. Other interpreters simply say the 23 mile pipeline and the popular slang phrase is what gave the town its name.

Katy, bar the door!

"Katy, bar the door!" means "Watch out—there's trouble coming!" The phrase is used mostly in southern USA, but it's not certain that it originated there.

"Bar the door" is a self-explanatory, common expression, referring to locking a door against intruders. It appears in a couple of ballads published in 1769 that seem to have engendered the catchphrase. But who is Katy? There's no satisfactory answer to that question, but the phrase is connected with traditional folk music on both sides of the Atlantic.

One suggestion as to the origin of the phrase is that it comes from the traditional Scottish folk-song *Get Up and Bar the Door*, published in 1776. It is about a husband and wife arguing over who should get up and lock the door. They decide that the first one who speaks will do it. While they sit in silence, two men enter and plunder the house, but the couple remain silent until the intruders threaten to kiss the wife, at which point the husband stands up and speaks out, and the wife cackles that he has lost the bet.

The points against this being the phrase's origin are that it doesn't mention Katy and it isn't American, although the latter point could be explained by the emigration of many Scots to the USA at the end of the 1800s. It does, however, link the failure to bar the door with impending trouble.

Robert Burns also used "bar the door" in his bawdy *Reels o' Bogie*, which was set to music.

> Said I, young man, more you can't do,
> I think I've granted your desire,
> By bobbing on my wanton clue,
> You see your pintle's all on fire.
> When on my back I work like steel
> An bar the door wi my left heel,
> The mair you fuck the less I feel,
> An that's the reels o' Bogie.

Bar the door's use in American folk music dates to at least 1850, when it appears in *A Christmas Song: A Song of a Pleasant Old Woodman, and his Wife Joan, at a Christmas Fire* by an F. J. Palmer. The song is about an older couple who lock the door so their grandchildren will not disturb their amorous activities. The song opens:

> "Come! Jock o' the wood, my jolly old man! get up and bar the door!
> The feathery sleet with frosty foot, is dancing on the moor."

But while "bar the door" appears in folk songs on both sides of the Atlantic,

so far there is no Katy. The first known association of a woman of that name barring the door in the phrase is from an 1841 poem *The Old Smithy*, published in a London collection of sketches and stories titled *The Mirror*. The story is about a blacksmith who kills a lone traveler for his money on a dark, November night. Years later, a dog digs up the traveler's bones, the blacksmith hangs himself, and his wife dies of grief. The poem opens:

> "The snow is drifting on the ground,
> And loud the east wind roars;
> Come, men and maidens, hie you in;
> Kate, bar those creaking doors.
>
> "Call in the dogs, rouse up the fire;
> And, mistress, do you hear?
> Heat us a jug of elder wine,
> For the night is chill and drear."

The Kate here appears to be a servant in a public house or inn where the speaker is telling his grim tale.

Katy makes her American appearance in a nineteenth-century American fiddle tune entitled, appropriately enough, *Katie, Bar the Door*. We don't know who wrote the song or when it was written, but the earliest known reference to it is from the 2 October 1872 *Louisiana Democrat* of Alexandra, LA.

So, a song of that title existed in 1872, but efforts to track down its music or lyrics have been unsuccessful. In short, we have no idea who Katy or Katie was or why she should be barring the door. All we know is that the phrase appears in the mid nineteenth-century and that it has a connection to folk music.

Another theory about "Katy" is the following. King James I, who was set upon in 1437 by unhappy Scots, took refuge in a room whose door had no bar lock. One Catherine Douglas tried to keep the door closed with her arm, but the mob broke through and murdered the king. Catherine thus earned the name "Kate Barlass."

So, the chronology works for the Kate Barlass legend being the inspiration of the phrase. But, other than the timing, there is no particular reason to connect Kate Barlass with the Katy who is barring the door in the phrase.

can of corn

In the world of baseball, a "can of corn" means an easily caught fly ball. Generally, an outfielder will not have to move far or exert much effort to

make the catch. "With two out in the ninth, DiMaggio hit a 'can of corn' to left fielder Hartnett…" (*New York Times*, 1949)

Joe DiMaggio's 56-Game Hitting Streak (1941) included numerous "can of corn" catches by opposing outfielders. Despite his impressive hitting, not every ball he hit was difficult to catch. Some were easy fly balls, making them classic examples.

Although it's not known exactly how the phrase came to exist in baseball, there are a couple of theories.

The idiom most likely originated from the old American grocery store practice in the early 1900s, where shopkeepers pulled down canned goods from high shelves with a hooked stick. The can would fall for an easy catch by hand or into their aprons, much like a fly ball in baseball. Canned corn was highly popular, hence the phrase. Another advantage is that the phrase has alliteration, which makes it easy to say. "Can of peaches" would never have worked.

Another theory arises from the fact that, in the very early days of baseball, the outfields of some baseball playing areas were on farms. In fact, some of the outfields were lined with a cornfield instead of a fence. So the outfield received the nickname "cornfield."

Cans of corn dropping from high shelves makes a lot more sense, though. You can imagine how it happened. A guy who plays baseball is buying groceries. The grocer hooks and catches a can of corn. The baseball guy says, "Nice catch!" Later, he tells his buddies about the easy catch of a can of corn and, next thing you know, cans of corn are flying all over the infield and the outfield.

Bob's your uncle

This British phrase is used to say that something is easy and/or quick to do. For example, "Just complete the form, pay the fee, and Bob's your uncle!"

But who was Bob?

The word "bob" has had many slang associations over the years, often linked to crime, gambling or deceit. The slang phrase "all is bob," meaning that everything is pleasant, satisfactory or safe, dates from the 1600s. It's in *The New Dictionary of the Canting Crew* of 1699 as "it's all bob," meaning something good.

'Bob's your uncle' is one of those phrases that keep etymologists scratching their heads and searching old newspapers. It's been thoroughly researched but no one is sure of its origin. As with all such mysteries there are plenty of suggestions, but only two are plausible.

The first idea is that Bob and his nephew were the Marquess of Salisbury and Arthur Balfour. Salisbury, who was the 20th British Prime Minister, had Robert as his first name, which we can shorten to 'Bob.'

'Bob's your uncle' is said to derive from the supposed nepotism of Lord Salisbury, in appointing a favorite nephew, Arthur Balfour, to several political posts in the 1880s. Balfour went on to become Prime Minister after his uncle.

It is unlikely that Arthur Balfour would ever have become a celebrated politician without the patronage of his influential uncle. Piers Brendon, in *Eminent Edwardians*, 1979, writes: "In 1887, Balfour was unexpectedly promoted to the vital front line post of Chief Secretary for Ireland by his uncle Robert, Lord Salisbury."

The link is easy to make. The fact that the word 'nepotism' derives from 'nephew' makes the link seem all the more neat.

The second possible source is the music hall. The earliest known example of the phrase in print is in the bill for a performance of a musical revue in Dundee called *Bob's Your Uncle*, which appeared in the Scottish newspaper *The Angus Evening Telegraph* in June 1924.

The expression also formed part of the lyrics of a song written by John P. Long, and published in 1931 – *Follow Your Uncle Bob*. The lyrics include:

> Bob's your uncle
> Follow your Uncle Bob
> He knows what to do
> He'll look after you

The song was sung and recorded in 1931 by Florrie Forde, the celebrated music hall artiste of the early 20th century.

The difficulty with the first suggested origin is the date. The phrase itself isn't recorded until the 1920s and doesn't begin appearing in newspapers until after WWII. It would seem odd for a phrase to be coined about the nepotism of an uncle for his nephew some 40 years after both Prime Ministers were out of office.

The nepotism story would of course be popular, but this expression most probably came into being with Florrie Forde's song.

It's possible that the lyrics allude to Balfour and his uncle. But they could also allude to the slang use of "bob" as being something good.

A side note: Another show with the name "Bob's Your Uncle" appears in the record in April 1929, in the *North Devon Journal*, Barnstaple. A brief notice of it in the same journal describes it as a "revuesical" (a blend of revue and musical).

It makes me wonder if that's where the name "Popsicle" came from.

garbage in, garbage out

"Garbage in, garbage out" (often abbreviated as GIGO) is used to express the idea that in computing and any other sphere, poor quality input will always produce faulty output.

The phrase originated in the field of computing. It was probably the first thing I learned about computers after learning how to boot one up.

Rubbish in, rubbish out (RIRO) is an alternate wording. The principle applies to all logical argumentation: soundness implies validity, but validity does not imply soundness.

The first known use of the expression is in a 1957 syndicated newspaper article about US Army mathematicians and their work with early computers, in which an Army Specialist named William D. Mellin explained that computers cannot think for themselves, and that "sloppily programmed" inputs inevitably lead to incorrect outputs.

More recently, the Marine Accident Investigation Branch came to a similar conclusion: "A loading computer is an effective and useful tool for the safe running of a ship. However, its output can only be as accurate as the information entered into it."

In 1987, the *Washington Times* said, "The computer rule 'garbage in, garbage out' applies to the human mind just as much as it does to the computer."

mayday

"Mayday" is an emergency word used internationally as a distress signal in voice-procedure radio communications and has been since 1927.

"May Day," on the other hand, is a day we in the northern hemisphere have

historically reserved for fun springtime activities, like the maypole and picnics; a day when we can see summer and sprinklers and Popsicles right around the corner. The terms sound similar, but they have different origins and different spellings. May Day originated in the 1200s.

"Mayday" is used mostly by airplane pilots, boat captains and some emergency response personnel, and most of us are happily only familiar with it through TV and fiction. The US Coast Guard deals with roughly 25,000 distress calls every year, some of which involve the famous mayday distress call.

Mayday first came into English in 1923. There was a lot of air traffic between England and France in those days, and both parties wanted to find a good distress signal that everyone would understand. Yes, there was S.O.S. but there were some problems with it.

"Owing to the difficulty of distinguishing the letter 'S' by telephone, the international distress signal 'S.O.S.' will give place to the words 'May-day,' the phonetic equivalent of 'M'aidez,' the French for 'Help me.'" (New Air Distress Signal, *The Times* [London], 2 Feb. 1923)

SOS was most commonly used in telegraphic communications, where the unmistakable pattern of SOS in Morse code (...---...) was easy to remember and easy to decipher. SOS was used predominantly by ships that were in distress. Aircraft, by comparison, used radio and not telegraph as their primary means of communication and, when in distress, a pilot wouldn't have time to clarify to anyone listening that they meant S as in "Sam" and not F as in "Frank." A short, easily understood word that couldn't be mistaken for something else was necessary.

In practice, due to radio interference and loud ambient noise, pilots are told to repeat the word three times: "Mayday, mayday, mayday." The repetition also serves to help radio operators distinguish the transmission from others that simply refer to the mayday call.

Given its importance, most people respect the mayday signal and use it only when absolutely necessary. Sadly, the Coast Guard occasionally deals with hoax calls, owing in large part to the virtually untraceable VHF radio signals it uses to receive distress signals.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless man-hours may be wasted trying to rescue people who were never in danger. People who abuse this system can be jailed for up to 10 years and fined $250,000.

"Mayday" is the signal that there's an urgent and life-threatening situation in

progress. However, operators can also fall back on, "pan-pan," which means you have an urgent situation that's not immediately putting lives at risk – for instance, your boat ran out of fuel and you need assistance.

pardon my French

"Pardon my French" is a common English phrase ostensibly describing profanity as words from the French language. The phrase is uttered to excuse the user of profanity, swearing, or curses in the presence of those offended by it, under the pretense of the words being part of a foreign language.

One of the earliest recorded uses of the phrase was in a story published by Karl Von Miltie in 1831, in his book *The Twelve Nights*. Karl writes: "My dear Mr. Heartwell, you are come to see me at last. Bless me, how fat you are grown!—absolutely round as a ball:—you will soon be as *embonpoint* (excuse my French) as your poor dear father, the major."

To be clear, "embonpoint" describes persons who are considered larger than usual. In this quote therefore, the speaker is not apologizing for the insult, rather apologizing for saying the insult in the French language.

To truly understand the influence of French on the English language, we need to go back to the medieval period and the Norman Conquest. Following the Battle of Hastings in the 10th century, when William the Conqueror invaded England, he made French the official language of the English upper class, the courts, and the government. The peasants spoke English. William himself never did learn to speak English.

Eventually the English language did take over from French, but about 10,000 introduced French words are still used today. For example, "sabotage" originates from the French word *sabot*, which is a wooden clog worn by French and Breton peasants. As industrialization swept through Europe, angry peasants soon discovered that a sabot, when placed in machinery, would effectively bring the factories to a halt, thus "sabotaging" the factories. The word coupon comes from the French verb *couper*, meaning to cut.

So how did this lead to "pardon my French"? The phrase was originally used quite legitimately in England when someone used a French word while speaking to someone who did not understand French. Thus, the phrase evolved from a bonafide apology for using haughty language to a bonafide apology for using naughty language.

Incidentally, several expressions are used by both the English and the French to describe the same culturally unacceptable habit, but attributing the habit to

the other nationality:

—"to take a French leave" (to depart a party or other gathering without taking polite leave of one's host) is referenced in French as *filer à l'anglaise* ("leave English-style").

—"French letter" (now somewhat archaic, referring to a condom) is rendered in French as *capote anglaise* ("English hood" or "English cap").

—During the 1500s in England, genital herpes was called the "French disease" and "French-sick" was a term for syphilis. The French gave the English a break on this one by calling it *le Mal de Naples* (the Napoli disease), after the syphilis outbreak in 1494/1495 while French troops were besieging Naples.

Due to the vast history of conflict between the French and the English, "pardon my French," like many other phrases, soon became a dig at the French. Every country has neighbors they like to look down on. For the English it's the French. And for the French, of course, it's the English.

okay

"Okay" is a term of approval, assent, or acknowledgment.

It can be spelled in many ways: OK, O.K., okey-dokey, k, 'kay, m'kay, A-OK, otay, ok, okeh, okey, okie-dokie. Oh, and it's also the official abbreviation for Oklahoma.

Here is a more detailed list of meanings:
—all right; satisfactory: "Everything is OK."
—correct, permissible, or acceptable
—feeling well
—safe; sound
—estimable, likable, or dependable
—well enough, fine: "He sings OK."
—used to request or express agreement: "Okay?"
—an approval, agreement, or endorsement
—to authorize
—to indicate compliance: "Okay."
—to indicate understanding or acknowledgment
—adequate but unremarkable
—mediocre: "The coffee was fine; the burger was just OK."

OK is probably the most widely recognized word in the world. It began as a

piece of insider slang from the late 1830s and rode a presidential campaign to nationwide fame and eventually worldwide use.

In the early 1800s, new printing technologies dramatically reduced the cost of publishing a daily newspaper, and there was a resulting explosion of inexpensive new dailies known collectively as the penny press. Competing for readers, penny papers in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Boston published not only straight news stories, but also witty takes on the latest political scandals, social scenes, and popular trends.

It was the chatty internet of the 1830s. And, much like the internet, the lively back-and-forth chatter between penny paper editors gave birth to a new way of writing and eventually a new way of speaking.

An abbreviation fad began in Boston in the summer of 1838. Here are examples from Boston's *Morning Post*, whose editor, Charles Gordon Greene, sprinkled his columns with acronyms for anything and everything:

O.F.M. (our first men)
W.O.O.O.F.C. (with one of our first citizens)
R.T.B.S. (remains to be seen)
S.P. (small potatoes)
G.T.D.H.D. (give the devil his due)
W.Y.G. (will you go?)

By 1939, the "initial language," as it was sometimes called, had arrived in New York City and had already leapt from print to fashionable slang. "This is a species of spoken shorthand," wrote the editors of New York's *Evening Tattler.*

In addition to the abbreviation craze, 19th-century Americans thought it was really funny to purposely misspell stuff. Abbreviations were not immune. By the late 1830s, the misspelling trend had combined with the acronym craze to produce abbreviations like:

K.G. for "no go" (as if spelled "know go")
K.Y. for "no use" (as if spelled "know yuse")
O.W. for "all right" (as if spelled "oll wright")

This was good practice for today's use of the internet, where "brb" means "be right back," "lol" means "laughing out loud," and "wtf" means…but you know what "wtf" means. And I'll bet a lot of people were saying it, or at least thinking it, when they read those abbreviations in the *Morning Post*.

The authoritative text on the subject is by professor Allan Metcalf, whose *OK: The Improbable Story of America's Greatest Word*, based on the research of historian Allen Walker Read, was published in 2010. Metcalf traces the

word's birth to a bit of jocular text in an 1839 article.

Before we get to the article, let's tip our hats to Allen Walker Read, the man who solved the mystery of OK's origins. Keep in mind that Read was working in the 1960s, decades before searchable digital newspaper archives. "Read must have spent hundreds of hours digging through tons and tons of physical newspapers, journals, private letters and other documents," says Liberman, who writes the weekly *Oxford Etymologist* blog and knows firsthand how hard it is to track down the history of words. "What that man did was absolutely astounding."

The editor of Boston's *Morning Post*, Charles Gordon Greene, was engaged in some good-natured trash talk with the editors of the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island. It had to do with a semi-satirical citizens group in Boston called the Anti-Bell-Ringing Society (or A.B.R.S.), of which Greene was a member.

The Providence paper poked fun at Greene and the A.B.R.S. and Greene had to set the record straight. So it was that on March 21, 1839, at the end of a short paragraph defending the A.B.R.S., Greene printed the following words: "o.k. — all correct."

See what he did there? Similar to using O.W. for "oll wright," Greene had coined a new misspelled acronym: O.K. for "oll korrect." Three days after Greene introduced OK to the world, the *Providence Journal* editors responded with an "O.K." of their own. And the word was off and running.

Thus, OK became one of the more commonly used initialisms. It might have passed into oblivion when the linguistic fad had passed if not for the presidential election of 1840, when Martin Van Buren was given the nickname of "Old Kinderhook" because of his hometown of Kinderhook, NY. The Van Buren fans who joined "OK Clubs" nationwide were themselves, they proclaimed, "OK." Their campaign was memorable enough to both popularize the word and to hijack the story of its origin. There are still those who believe that "Old Kinderhook" is the original meaning of OK.

As OK spread (helped along by the advent of the telegraph), its origin story was a topic of much speculation. "Old Kinderhook" persisted, and various linguistic ancestors from various languages were also proposed, with forebears from Latin, Greek, Scottish, French, Finnish, Anglo-Saxon via Swedish, Mandingo, and Wolof all being offered. The most persistent of these ancestors was the Choctaw word okeh. This etymon was suggested in 1885, with Andrew Jackson supposedly having borrowed the word from members of the Choctaw tribe.

Novelist Louisa May Alcott was among the early adopters. "One of us must

marry well. Meg didn't, Jo won't, Beth can't yet, so I shall, and make everything okay all round." (Little Women, 1868-9) However, the 1880 edition of Little Women included neither okay nor OK, opting instead for the word cozy. The editors probably regarded okay as slang.

A *BBC Magazine* article speculated as to why OK was popular all over the world, saying that it wasn't needed to fill a gap in any language. Before 1839, English speakers had 'yes,' 'good,' 'fine,' 'excellent,' 'satisfactory,' and 'all right.' What OK provided that the others did not was neutrality, a way to affirm or to express agreement without having to offer an opinion.

cool

"Cool" has been used figuratively for decades to describe something fashionable, impressive, or socially acceptable. This use originated in the early 1900s and gained widespread popularity in the 1940s and 1950s through jazz culture and the influence of Black Americans.

This cool word has many meanings, both literal and figurative, and does duty as an adjective, noun, and verb. Some of its synonyms are: composed, collected, imperturbable, and nonchalant.

Definitions:
—neither warm nor cold, pleasant
—giving relief from heat: "a cool breeze"
—marked by calm self-control: "a cool negotiator"
—indifferent or disdainful: "a cool greeting"
—of colors that appear cool (like blue)
—to make or become less warm
—to become or make less ardent: "cooled my enthusiasm"
—to become calmer: "need time for tempers to cool"
—in physics, to reduce the kinetic energy of an object

Slang usages:
—know all the latest trends: "be cool"
—excellent, sophisticated, fashionable: "a cool sports car"
—acceptable: "It's cool if you don't want to talk about it."
—actual: "worth a cool million"
—informal, casual: "play it cool"
—of jazz: (All jazz is cool, man!)

Idioms:
cool as a cucumber — calm and composed
cool customer — a person who doesn't show his emotions

keep a cool head — stay calm
keep your cool — stay calm
cool it — relax, or stop doing something
cool your jets — calm down
lose your cool — lose your temper
cool (one's) heels — to wait or be kept waiting.

Originally, "cool" was used in African American vernacular to mean "excellent, superlative," first recorded in written English in the early 1930s. Jazz musicians were responsible for its popularization during the 1940s. As a slang word, it has stayed current (and cool) far longer than most such words.

One of the main characteristics of slang is the continual renewal of its vocabulary. In order for slang to stay slangy, it has to have a feeling of novelty. Slang expressions meaning the same thing as cool, such as bully, capital, hot, groovy, hep, crazy, nervous, far-out, rad, and def have not had the staying power or universal appeal of cool.

Because of the various interpretations of what is considered cool, as well as its subjective nature, the word has no single meaning. For most, coolness is associated with composure and self-control. When used in conversation, it often expresses admiration or approval. Although commonly regarded as slang, cool is widely used among different social groups and has endured in usage for generations.

There is no objective expression of coolness, as it varies wildly within cultures, ideologies, interests, and individuals. One consistent aspect, however, is that being cool is widely seen as desirable.

The sum of coolness is a self-conscious confidence in overall behavior, demonstrated by a set of body movements, postures, facial expressions, and voice modulations that take on strategic social value within certain contexts.

Cool was once an attitude fostered by rebels and underdogs—such as slaves, prisoners, bikers, political dissidents, etc.—for whom open rebellion invited punishment, so they hid defiance behind a wall of ironic detachment, distancing that defiance from the source of authority rather than directly confronting it.

In general, coolness is a trait based on the inference that the person or brand is not constrained by the norms, expectations, or beliefs of others.

Cool is also used for describing a general state of calmness and well-being or a transcendent, internal state of peace and serenity, harmony and balance, particularly in times of stress.

In the novel *Lords and Ladies* by Terry Pratchett, the "Monks of Cool" are mentioned. In their passing-out test, a novice must select the "coolest" garment from a room full of clothes. The correct answer is "Hey, whatever I select," suggesting that cool is primarily an attitude of self-assurance.

And that's cool, man!

going down the rabbit hole

"Going down the rabbit hole" (or falling down it) is a metaphor for something that transports someone into a wonderful (or troubling) surreal state or situation. On the internet, a rabbit hole often refers to a very engrossing and time-consuming topic.

Literally, of course, a rabbit hole is what the animal digs for its home and the earliest written record of the phrase dates back to the 1600s.

Lewis Carroll introduced the phrase "Down the Rabbit-Hole," as the title for the first chapter of his 1865 novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, after which the term slowly entered the English vernacular. In this opening chapter, Alice follows the White Rabbit into his burrow, which transports her to the strange, surreal, and nonsensical world of Wonderland. In the 21st century, the term has come to describe a person who gets lost in research or loses track of time while using the internet.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* finds the first allusive rabbit hole in a 1938 edition of *The Yale Law Journal*: "It is the Rabbit-Hole down which we fell into the Law, and to him who has gone down it, no queer performance is strange." Over much of the 1900s, "rabbit hole" was used to characterize bizarre and irrational experiences. It's especially used to reference magical, challenging, and even dangerous places or positions, similar to Carroll's topsy-turvy Wonderland.

Rabbit hole has many metaphorical applications—from frustrating red tape to the mind-bending complexity of science to hallucinations during altered states—all united by a common sense of passing into some labyrinthine, logic-defying realm that, once entered, is hard to get out of. One can fall down the rabbit hole of government bureaucracy, tax law, healthcare, the political economy of modern Japan, puberty, college admissions, or quantum mechanics.

As Kathryn Schulz observed for *The New Yorker* in 2015, rabbit hole has further evolved in the information age: "These days…when we say that we

fell down the rabbit hole, we seldom mean that we wound up somewhere psychedelically strange. We mean that we got interested in something to the point of distraction—usually by accident, and usually to a degree that the subject in question might not seem to merit."

Thanks to the abundance, variety, and instant access of content online, many fall down internet rabbit holes which are often addictive: scary stories, obscure conspiracy theories, or famous last meals, for instance.

Other rabbit holes tend to be opened up by social media, which serve users item after item, link after link: Wikipedia, Netflix, Amazon, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth. These rabbit holes have become so common that people sometimes swap out rabbit for the name of the particular site. For example, "I've fallen down an Instagram hole" or "I'm falling down a wikihole."

Internet rabbit holes convey less a sense of weirdness, disorientation, or difficulty than they do of an intensely captivating diversion. Rabbit hole is also showing increasing use as a modifier, for example, a rabbit-hole question or phenomenon.

The term often has a positive connotation, though. Falling down a rabbit hole can mean that a person is engaged in a guilty pleasure.

And who can say no to pleasure?

unicorn

A "unicorn" is a mythical, usually white animal generally depicted with the body and head of a horse with a long flowing mane and tail and a single, often spiraled, horn in the middle of the forehead. The word can also be used to mean something unusual, rare, or unique.

Unicorns are symbols of purity and grace, believed to be elusive and magical beings. In some legends, only virgins could tame or approach unicorns. In various cultures, the unicorn's horn was believed to possess magical powers of healing, making water potable, and the ability to neutralize poisons. The other obvious possibility is that they provide a means for the unicorn to defend itself against predators, such as human hunters or its legendary rival, the lion.

Unicorns have appeared in stories from ancient China to medieval Europe, symbolizing everything from strength and courage to innocence and harmony with nature. The creatures are sometimes linked to rainbows, considered a manifestation of their ethereal essence. The rainbow flag, created by

American artist Gilbert Baker in 1978 as a symbol of the diversity of the queer community, became prominent during the gay rights protests of the 1970s and 1980s. Unicorns, linked to rainbows since the Victorian Era, became symbols of the queer community.

Unicorn-like imagery dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization (3300 - 1300 BCE) in South Asia, which included parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. A side profile of what looks like a horse with a single horn appears on seals from that period.

Unicorns are not found in Greek mythology, but rather in the accounts of natural history, for Greek writers of natural history were convinced of the reality of unicorns, which they believed lived in India, a distant and fabulous realm for them.

Unicorns on a relief sculpture have been found at the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis in Iran. Pliny the Elder mentions the oryx and an Indian ox (perhaps a greater one-horned rhinoceros) as one-horned beasts, as well as "a very fierce animal called the monoceros which has the head of the stag, the feet of the elephant, and the tail of the boar, while the rest of the body is like that of the horse; it makes a deep lowing noise, and has a single black horn, which projects from the middle of its forehead, two cubits [35 inches] in length."

The most famous real-life "unicorn" of the natural world is the narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*), a marine animal that dwells in the Arctic oceans and has a single tusk. But this tusk does not possess any magical traits; it's just an oversized canine tooth that grows straight out of the creature's face.

The exact purpose of the tusk remains a topic of scientific dispute, but it might well function as a sense organ since it's loaded with sensitive nerve endings. Some researchers theorize that narwhals use the tusk to focus their potent echolocation powers, which they use to hunt fish, shrimp and squid. However, sensory explanations for narwhal tusks are undercut by the fact that females rarely grow them.

In fact, at one point in time, unicorns really did exist — but they weren't magical, glittery ones. According to scientists, these very real animals, known as Siberian unicorns, reportedly roamed around Western Siberia roughly between 35,000 and 39,000 years ago.

Also known as *Elasmotherium sibiricum*, the Siberian unicorn presents a fascinating contrast to the conventional unicorn of mythology. Unlike the single-horned horse-like creatures often depicted, the Siberian unicorn was a real prehistoric mammal resembling a rhino. These real-life unicorns looked

nothing like their mystical counterparts. The creatures weighed up to two times as much as modern rhinos and had protruding humps on their shoulders. Hardly ethereal!

The rhino-looking unicorn ultimately faced extinction due to a combination of factors, including changing climate conditions and shifts in vegetation. As the environment altered, its grazing habitats diminished. Despite its robust size and unique horn, the pressures of a transforming ecosystem led to its eventual disappearance.

One of the unicorn's first appearances in fantasy literature was in Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking-Glass*, and a quote from that has been used on many cute T-shirts for girls in recent years. "Well, now that we have seen each other," said the unicorn, "if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you."

14 – Fabrications

shirty

If you're "shirty," you're irritable or angry, especially in a rude way. "He was shirty with the people who arrived late."

P. G. Wodehouse in a 1934 *Jeeves* novel had a character say, "But don't tell me that when he saw how shirty she was about it, the chump didn't back down?"

The word was first seen in print around 1846. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* by Eric Partridge suggests that it comes from the custom of taking off one's shirt before fighting.

in like a dirty shirt

Being "in like a dirty shirt" means you are fully involved in something. It can also mean being well-connected or shrewdly opportunistic. "I put the chocolate cake on the table, and he was in like a dirty shirt."

Why dirty? Who knows?

off like a dirty shirt

"Off like a dirty shirt" means commencing immediately, or leaving right away, as in getting off work in a hurry and heading home for the weekend. "I told my kid we were going to the store for an ice cream cone, and he was off like a dirty shirt."

stuffed shirt

A "stuffed shirt" is a conservative, pompous person who thinks he is very important.

Shakespeare had the idea in *Much Ado about Nothing*: "He is no less than a stuffed man," implying that this person was so full of himself that he was, in fact, quite empty. The current cliché dates from about 1900.

The stuffed shirt bears some resemblance to the "empty suit," a person whose importance is greatly over exaggerated. Both imply a sort of useless quality to someone and suggest a person who is likely to bore you.

There are two explanations for the origin of the term. The first is that anyone who made a scarecrow clearly had to stuff the shirt with hay, newspapers, or old clothes in order to better produce what looked like a person. The scarecrow as a fake person does not frighten most humans, and even crows may be unimpressed.

The second explanation is that, in the 19th century, many shirts for both men and women were elaborately starched affairs. To show off the shirts in shop windows, retailers used newspaper or hay to stuff starched shirts, sometimes called shirtwaists, so a potential buyer would get an idea of how the shirt would look when worn. Starching shirts often made the garment appear quite inflexible.

A stuffed shirt may be unwilling to bend on any trivial issue. He or she feels that his or her way of doing things is the one and only correct way, and will be quick to point that out or be rude to others who may live their lives according to different standards.

empty suit

An "empty suit" is a person who appears to have authority and importance but who is actually ineffectual, incompetent, or average and unremarkable.

An empty suit tends to refer to a non-important person — perhaps someone puffed up with his own importance but really having little effect on the lives of others. The true empty suit, which conjures up the image of a business suit of clothing without a person, really doesn't know what he or she is doing. Such a person may be a phony and about as relevant or helpful as a suit hanging on a rack.

Tracing the word origin of empty suit is a difficult task. There is some suggestion in Greek mythology, credited to the Classical Greek playwright Euripides, that Helen, married to Menelaus and stolen by Paris, was actually sequestered on an island by Apollo. Paris actually stole an empty image or empty tunic of Helen, rather than the real woman. I doubt that this is the true source of the phrase, but the concept has been around for a long time.

This quote is from a man who spent his life in advertising. "There was a term thrown around for account leaders who got promoted too fast: 'empty suit.' It

was used to describe leaders who lacked substantive experience, knowledge or wisdom in the craft of advertising. Instead, these leaders would hide their lack of wisdom with arrogance or charisma that only took them so far."

Some politicians deserve the title. A senator with a very poor voting record, or who fails to attend senate sessions could clearly be called an empty suit because he is not really performing the job for which he was elected.

suits

The plain word "suits" has been used as a derogatory term.

From the late 1960s onward, "suits" referred to people living a conformist lifestyle, as opposed to the hippie lifestyle. Suits were people in the mainstream who lived and died by the principles of capitalism rather than the semi-Marxist attitudes adopted by hippies. In this usage, a "suit" was considered a derogatory term by a hippie and associated with "the establishment."

In films, one sees members of the FBI referred to as "the suits," by members of local police departments. Arrival of "the suits" is often depicted as resented because it usually means that local police involvement is either about to be ended or directed by the FBI. There are numerous film examples of the word suit to mean FBI, but cooperative efforts to solve real crimes by local police forces and FBI members suggest local police often welcome FBI presence in investigation, and do not view suited members of the FBI as mere suits.

give someone the shirt off your back

If you're willing to "give someone the shirt off your back," you're willing to do anything to help another person, even to giving anything and everything you possess. For example, "Tom is truly generous—he'll give you the shirt off his back."

This hyperbolic idiom was first recorded in 1771.

keep your shirt on

If someone says to you, "keep your shirt on," that person is telling you to stay calm, to be patient, to refrain from panicking or losing your temper. First used in the mid-1800s, the idiom is an American term that most probably stems from the fact that at that time, most men only owned one or perhaps two

shirts. Before taking part in an altercation, a man would remove his shirt in order to save it from being ruined or soiled. The act of removing one's shirt would serve as a signal that a situation was becoming heated. Telling someone to keep his shirt on indicated an attempt to reduce tension.

This idiom means the same thing as "keep your pants on." The source is unknown.

It's hard to keep your shirt on if you have to get something off your chest.

lose your shirt

To "lose your shirt" is to suffer total financial loss, especially as a result of a bet or bad investment. This phrase implies not just loss, but ultimate loss. If you have lost the shirt off your back then you are not left with much.

The expression "lose one's shirt" came into use in the 1930s and is probably a description of what happened to many people during the stock market crash in 1929.

"Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." (Mark Twain)

been there, done that, got the t-shirt

When someone says "been there, done that," they mean that whatever is being talked about is commonplace to them, to the point of boredom. "Rick wants me to go backpacking in India with him, but I've been there, done that."

This phrase began life in the early 1970s, in the short form 'been there.' The term most probably evolved from a phrase that was popular in the late 1800s, "been and gone and done it." Some believe that the term first arose in America; others ascribe it to Australia.

By the 1990s the phrase was often lengthened to "been there, done that, got the T-shirt" for extra emphasis. The addition of "got the T-shirt" alludes to the fact that tourists and event-goers often buy T-shirts emblazoned with logos pertaining to the experience. An even longer rendition has popped up as "been there, done that, got the T-shirt, won the trophy."

And, having begun adding to the original "been there," there's no real limit to how far people will go. An August 2007 posting in the *alt.music.pink-floyd Usenet Newsgroup* claimed to have "Been there, done that, got the t-shirt,

wore a hole in it and now use it as a duster."

get one's panties/boxers in a twist

To "get one's panties or boxers in a twist" means to become very agitated or angry over something trivial or unimportant.

The variant, or possibly it's the original expression, comes from Australia and is "don't get your knickers in a knot." The word "knickers," meaning the women's undergarments known in the US as panties, is a shortening of knickerbockers.

The usage of the phrase is intended to be humorous and might be directed at either sex.

The expression began to be used in England in the late 1960s. The first example found in print is in *Pigeon Racing News and Gazette* - Volume 25, 1969: "Just got me knickers in a twist after the New Year celebrations."

One North American version is "don't get your panties in a bunch."

tabby

We normally think of "tabby" as a house cat with stripes in its fur, often in browns and grays. Occasionally one will dangle off a branch under a caption that says, "Hang in there."

"Tabby" can refer to domesticated cats, but it's also an adjective describing the stripy pattern itself. In the 1600s, tabby was a rich, watered silk fabric, the word coming from the Arabic language.

Yet another meaning is "a mixture of oyster shells, lime, sand, and water used as a building material." That meaning came from *gullah tabi*, ultimately from Spanish *tabia* adobe wall. "I can't work up the tabby I need to mortar it solid."

The name for the cloth called tabby, a kind of silk taffeta with an irregular wavy finish, was adopted from Arabic into Medieval Latin as *attabi*, and then into French as *tabis*. English speakers modified the word to tabby in the early 1600s. They didn't connect it to cats at that point, though.

But cats do have a way of inserting themselves into all aspects of our lives. Within a few decades of the adoption of the word tabby, the word was also being used to describe the markings on the coats of some cats. By the late

1700s, the word was being used to describe the cats themselves as well.

Eventually the fabric meaning of the word faded from prominence, and "tabby" was free to devote itself wholly to cats, which no doubt pleased the cats.

cotton on to

"Cotton on to" means to like someone or something. For example, "This dog doesn't cotton to strangers." The term also means to come to understand or grasp something. For example, "She didn't really cotton on to what I was saying."

As far back as 1648, 'cotton' and 'cotton up to' were used to mean 'to make friendly advances.' Whether this referred to the annoying habit of moist raw cotton to stick to things or whether it alluded to moving of cotton garments closer together during a romantic advance isn't clear.

'Cottoning on' as we now use it derives from the meaning of 'attaching oneself to something,' specifically an attachment to an idea or a person we haven't encountered before. This phrase, oddly, did not arise in one of the major English-speaking cotton producing regions of the world, so it would seem to have little to do with the cotton plant.

'Cotton to' was coined in the UK and the first widespread uses of 'cotton on to' were in New Zealand and Australia. The earliest written example is from the New South Wales newspaper *The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, March 1883, reporting on a local horse race: "A lot [of backers] then cottoned on to Sahara, who was a strong favorite."

cotton-picking

"Cotton-picking" is an intensifier, used as a general term of disapproval. It's a substitute for the word "damned."

The expression began life in the late 1700s in the southern states of the US and differs from the 19th century Dixie term, 'cottonpicker,' in that the latter was derogatory and racist, whereas 'cotton-picking' referred directly to the difficulty and harshness of gathering the crop.

Of course, 'cotton-picking' must have been in use as an English phrase for as long as English-speaking people have picked cotton — originally without any racial overtones. There are numerous citations of 'cotton-picking' seasons,

jobs, machines, etc. since the late 1700s.

Manual cotton picking was tough work. The southern expression 'cutting in high cotton,' which means 'have it easy,' refers to the relatively easy task of cutting cotton without having to bend down.

It isn't until the 1940s that the term began to be used in any other context than that of the actual picking of cotton. The earliest such reference is found in the Pennsylvania newspaper, *The Daily Courier*, November 1942: "It's just about time some of our Northern meddlers started keeping their cotton-picking fingers out of the South's business."

While Bugs Bunny did not originate the term, Bugs can claim to have fixed it into the language, especially in its most often used form, “Wait just a cotton-picking minute!"

The expression 'out of your cotton-picking mind' is no longer deemed an acceptable description of a black person in the US. In April 2018 a white commentator (Brian Davis) said in a broadcast commentary of a basketball game that a black player (Russell Westbrook) was 'out of his cotton-picking mind.' The perceived racist connotations caused an uproar of protest. Davis, while claiming that the remark was unintentional, apologized, describing the comment as insensitive and a lapse of judgement. He was suspended from his position with the broadcaster.

in tall cotton

To be "in tall cotton" is to be in a time of great success or well-being, to be doing very well.

Cotton has long been a key crop in the US South's economy, so every harvest farmers pray for tall bushes loaded with white fluffy balls in their fields. Tall cotton bushes are easier to pick and yield higher returns.

the emperor's new clothes

"The emperor's new clothes" is the label given to anything fictional that people have been induced into believing is real, such as the current "climate crisis."

The source of the expression is Hans Christian Anderson's fable *The Emperor's New Clothes*, 1837.

The tale concerns an emperor who has an obsession with fancy new clothes, and spends lavishly on them, at the expense of state matters. One day, two con-men visit the emperor's capital. Posing as weavers, they offer to supply him with magnificent clothes that are invisible to those who are either incompetent or stupid. The gullible emperor hires them, and they set up looms and pretend to go to work. A succession of officials, starting with the emperor's wise and competent minister, and then ending with the emperor himself, visit them to check their progress. Each sees that the looms are empty but pretends otherwise to avoid being thought a fool.

Finally, the weavers report that the emperor's suit is finished. They mime dressing him and he sets off in a procession before the whole city. The townsfolk uncomfortably go along with the pretense, not wanting to appear inept or stupid, until a child blurts out that the emperor is wearing nothing at all. The people then realize that they have all been fooled. The emperor opts to continue the procession, walking more proudly than ever.

So, the meaning of the expression is clear from the story. It is used in contexts where people or ideas are widely acclaimed and admired but where others question whether they are of any value. Modern-day examples might be the highly priced work of conceptual artists or the more avant-guard products of fashion designers, as well as the afore-mentioned "climate crisis."

The phrase bears some similarity to another modern-day expression – the elephant in the room. An essential factor with both phrases is the willingness of people to engage in an unspoken contract to willfully disbelieve what they know to be true.

Andersen's tale is based on a 1335 story from a medieval Spanish collection of fifty-one cautionary tales with various sources such as Aesop and other classical writers.

As an idiom, use of the story's title refers to something widely accepted as true or professed as being praiseworthy, due to an unwillingness of the general population to criticize it or be seen as going against popular opinion.

The tale is extremely popular and has been translated into over 100 languages as well as adapted to movies, television, and music.

fancy-pants

"Fancy-pants" is used to describe something overly elaborate, swanky or pretentious, especially of dress. It's also applied to people who act in that manner.

This is an American phrase. The first reference to the term in print is in the Maine newspaper *The Bangor Daily Whig And Courier*, October 1843. In that, a company of auctioneers called Williams and Prince advertised the sale of "Fancy Pants – Cassimere." That clearly refers to pants that were fancy. Cassimere was a type of soft woollen twill cloth.

The first record that hyphenates fancy-pants, with the unequivocal intention of it being used as an adjective, is from *The Coshocton Tribune* in November 1939: "Bellamy borrowed the money to come west and borrowed some more to rent himself a Beverly Hills mansion complete with swimming pool and fancy-pants butler."

Fancy Pants is a 1950 American romantic comedy western film directed by George Marshall and starring Bob Hope and Lucille Ball.

cloth ears

"Cloth ears" is a humorous name for one who has not heard something that has been said. This phrases is primarily heard in UK.

The term 'cloth ears' originated in the weaving mills of the counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Many of the large mills that were built in the 1800s are still standing and some are complete with long rows of machinery, preserved as museums.

The noise in a spinning and weaving mill was tremendous. As one former cloth mill worker explained: "You were overwhelmed at the roar of noise, and for about three days all you could hear was the roar in your ears. But after that you became part and parcel of it and you could talk quite normally. Although you didn’t realize it, you were doing a lot of lip reading."

The name given to the deafness that mill workers were commonly afflicted with was 'cloth ears.' The equivalent condition that workers in nearby steel mills developed was 'boilermaker's deafness,' which is still the medical name for noise induced deafness.

The expression hasn't traveled far outside of England, although John Cleese did bring it to worldwide notice when he used it in *Fawlty Towers* to describe the character Polly (played by his co-writer and then wife, Connie Booth) as a "cloth-eared bint."

cut from the same cloth

If people or things are described as "cut from the same cloth," they are very similar in characteristics or behaviors, created, reared, or fashioned in the same way.

The phrase originated in the mid-15th century. At that time, cloth was typically woven wool, linen, or cotton. When the cloth was woven, it would be cut into bolt lengths that could be cut and sewn into multiple garments. To say that two people were "cut from the same cloth" meant that they shared similar qualities. The materials used to make their garments came from the same bolt of cloth.

Over time, from the 15th to the 17th centuries, this phrase spread through common English usage. It was employed as an idiomatic expression to convey how two or more people could be alike in their talents, ideals, personalities, or values, as if they shared a mutual "cloth."

cut your coat to suit your cloth

To "cut your coat to suit your cloth" is to shop or act in accordance with your financial limitations. In other words to make decisions and plans based on what you can afford, not what you'd like.

If a tailor cuts a coat according to your cloth, and you haven't provided enough, they will not pay attention to the cloth's pattern, woof, or warp. They will use every scrap, despite how the ultimate garment will appear. The idiom was proverbial in England in 1546, when John Heywood compiled a dialogue titled *Conteynyng Prouerbes and Epigrammes*.

The phrase indicates how people must adjust their actions, attitudes, or other things based on the situation they find themselves in, working with the cloth they have.

fit like a glove

When an article of clothing "fits like a glove," it is the perfect size and shape for the wearer, hugging the body in all the right places without being too tight or too loose. Gloves, by their nature, are expected to conform closely to the hands they cover, so the comparison highlights an exceptional match between the wearer and the garment.

Tobias Smollett used this simile in *Humphry Clinker* (1771): "The boots … fitted me like a glove."

handle with kid gloves

To "handle with kid gloves" is to treat something or someone delicately or carefully, with great care and sensitivity. Kid gloves are very soft leather gloves, typically made from the skin of a young goat, though early ones were often made from the more available lambskin.

Kid leather was the material used to make the classic white gloves worn by house servants, for example, or by those handling museum artifacts. Before long, kid gloves were associated with the aristocracy, a staple of foppish characters. The White Rabbit carries a pair in *Alice in Wonderland*.

To the rougher classes, however, the gloves might have seemed a delicate affectation:
"Our faces took the sunburn kindly; our chests gained in compass, and our shoulders in breadth and squareness; our great brown fists looked as if they had never been capable of kid gloves." (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, 1852)

"Kid-glove" was entered as an adjective in the 1909 *Webster's New International Dictionary* meaning "characterized by the fastidiousness, daintiness, or delicacy looked for in those who wear kid gloves." Use of the figurative phrase "with kid gloves" took hold by the end of the 1800s.

At that time, kid gloves were viewed as rather ostentatious and only suitable for the nouveau riche — much as heavy gold chains might be viewed today. The dismissal of the gloves by the socialite and fashion authority Beau Brummell was enough to send them to the back of the 19th century wardrobe. In fact, the description 'kid-gloved' came to be used as an insult, implying a lack of manhood.

It was only when the expression crossed the Atlantic that the negative connotations were lost and 'handling (or treating) with kid gloves' began to be used as we use it today, meaning 'delicately; carefully.'

decked out

The term "decked out" originates from the verb "deck," which means to adorn or decorate. It has been used since the early 1400s, initially in a nautical context, and has evolved to describe dressing up or decorating in a fancy way.

off the cuff

If someone does something "off the cuff," it's spontaneous and informal, not prepared in advance.

This expression originally comes from the idea of speakers jotting impromptu notes on their shirt cuffs, which they would then use as a reference when speaking without preparation. Clothes, in this context, represent an extension of one's readiness to adapt, where even the fabric of attire can be turned into a tool for spontaneous communication.

wear one's heart on one's sleeve

To "wear one's heart on one's sleeve" is to be very transparent, open, or forthright about one's emotions.

The origin of this phrase may come from medieval jousts. In the Middle Ages, "sleeve" not only referred to a part of a garment covering the arm but to a piece of armor for covering and protecting the arm. When participating in a joust, knights would often dedicate their performance to a lady of the court and wear something of hers, such as a scarf or ribbon, around their sleeve of armor, which indicated to the tournament's spectators which lady the knight favored.

However, this is mere conjecture since evidence is lacking. The only certainty is that by the 1600s, a figurative meaning of the phrase existed, as attested by Shakespeare's use, to express emotional honesty and openness.

tie the knot

"Tie the knot" means to get married. The phrase alludes to the handfasting ceremony, an ancient tradition of binding the hands of the bride and groom with lengths of cloth, cord, rope, or something similar, as a symbol of their lasting union.

The word 'knot' has been associated with marriage since at least the 1200s. The *Legend of St. Katherine*, circa 1225, used the Middle English *cnotte*, that is, 'knot,' to mean 'the tie or bond of wedlock; the marriage or wedding knot.'

Francis Grose, in his 1811 edition of the *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, listed the 'knot tied with the tongue' with specific reference to marriage. "He has tied a knot with his tongue, that he cannot untie with his teeth: that is, he is married."

hand-me-down

A "hand-me-down" is a second-hand (not new) item, usually a piece of clothing, that is passed down for continued use, often from an older sibling to a younger one. Some hand-me-downs are shabby or of inferior quality.

In business, this idiom can be extended to describe outdated or secondhand ideas, practices, or knowledge transferred from one person to another or from one generation of workers to the next.

buttoned-up

A "buttoned-up" person is very conservative, unimaginatively conventional, or old-fashioned, as of clothing, attitude, behavior, or beliefs. It may also mean coldly reserved or standoffish.

This phrase is linked to the image of a garment that is fastened up to the topmost button, presenting a closed-off and formal appearance.

hot under the collar

A person who is "hot under the collar" is angry, resentful, or embarrassed.

The heat of anger has been noted since ancient times, and it often manifests itself in a flushed, warm face and neck. The precise expression here has been used since the late nineteenth century, when high collars were still in fashion for men. It was well known enough by 1907 for O. Henry to play on it in *The Sphinx Apple*: "That makes Alice warm under the lace yoke."

In this scenario, the piece of clothing—the collar—becomes a measure of one’s temper or stress, reflecting internal states of frustration that spill over into physical awareness.

wear the pants in the family

To "wear the pants in the family" means to be in charge, to have the greatest amount of authority or control in one's family. The phrase is often applied to a woman, contrasting the fact that pants were historically only worn by men, who were also traditionally the decision makers within a household.

In the days that this phrase was coined, the person who "wore the pants" was normally expected to be the husband and father. The only reason to employ the phrase at all was to relate it to a woman, with the implication that the normal order had been overturned and that a woman was dominant over her husband.

The phrase was known in the US from the late 1800s. It probably originated there as printed references to it elsewhere don't appear until well into the 1900s.

cloak and dagger

The idiom "cloak and dagger" refers to espionage, often associated with spies and undercover operations. It evokes images of characters hiding their identities and engaging in deceptive actions.

Taken literally, the phrase could refer to using the cloak and dagger in Renaissance European martial arts. The purpose of the cloak was to obscure the presence or movement of the dagger, to provide minor protection from slashes, to restrict the movement of the opponent's weapon, and to provide a distraction.

The earliest written use of the phrase can be attributed to English poet Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Knight's Tale*, published around 1400.

Later, the phrase was used as a metaphor to describe circumstances involving mystery, intrigue, or espionage. An early example in print uses the imagery of a dagger concealed under a cloak, like this from *The Morning Post*, September 1836, "…carrying a dagger against the Church, under the capacious cloak of economy."

In literature, this phrase is often used as a descriptor for spy stories. It can also be used to refer to conversations that take place in private or restricted locations, such as back rooms or shadowy corridors. With its connotations of mystery and suspense, it is easy to see why the phrase has become so well known.

Charles Dickens helped to popularize it. In *Barnaby Rudge*, 1841, he made a sardonic reference to the type of melodramas that employed the cloak and dagger as stage devices.

a man of the cloth

"A man of the cloth" is a clergyman, minister, priest, or other religious leader.

Originally, the word "cloth" was used to mean the particular clothes worn by men in a profession and might have been considered a synonym for uniform. Early in the 1700s, the expression "man of the cloth" came to be used exclusively to refer to a man in the religious profession.

dressed to kill

"Dressed to kill" (or "dressed to the nines") means to be very fashionably or elaborately attired. "For the opening of the restaurant she was dressed to kill."

The phrase dates from the early 1800s in America. It appears in print in E. G. Paige's *Dow's Patent Sermons*, ca. 1849. "A gentleman tiptoeing along Broadway, with a lady wiggle-waggling by his side, and both dressed to kill." The word "kill" may allude to the idea of making a conquest, or perhaps it is an extension of something "done to death"—that is, overdone.

Or, we could take it as intending to make a striking impression that 'slays' onlookers, metaphorically speaking.

caught with one's pants down

To be "caught with one's pants down" is to be taken by surprise, often in a vulnerable and embarrassing position or situation.

The idiom draws on the shock and discomfort one would feel if his trousers were literally around his ankles, exposing him in ways he did not intend. It speaks to those moments of humorous mishap that remind us always to be ready for the unexpected.

at the drop of a hat

If you do something "at the drop of a hat," you do it without any hesitation, instantly.

The dropping of a hat used to be the signal for starting foot or horse races and also brawls, especially in the American Wild West. In the early 19th century, boxing matches were often started by someone dropping a hat.

The phrase is sometimes used to suggest that someone does not think carefully enough about their actions.

chink in one's armor

A "chink in one's armor" is a minor but detrimental flaw or weakness in someone's character or an argument that may cause problems for that person.

The term alludes to the medieval knight's armor made of mail — interlinked rings of metal jointed at various points. When a crack, or chink, developed between the links or joints, the knight was less protected against a spear or arrow. The noun "chink" has been used figuratively for such a fissure since the 1600s, and the current term came soon afterward.

15 – Water Water Everywhere

all wet

The slang expression "all wet" means completely wrong or mistaken. We don't know how moisture or dampness is related to wrongness, but suspect it's because any normally dry item becomes soggy and ineffectual when it's wet. The word "wet," by itself, is used in a derogatory sense. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the slang term as inept, ineffectual, feeble, liable to take the easy option, lacking intellectual and political hardness. It has been used in terms such as "wet fish" and implied in expressions like "a drip."

fish out of water

To say that someone is like a fish out of water is to describe a person out of his or her element. In other words, the person is in unfamiliar surroundings and doesn't feel comfortable there.

In ancient times, it was no doubt observed that fish don't survive long out of water, because their gills cannot take oxygen from the air. The simile reappears in numerous fourteenth-century writings. Chaucer used a version of it in *The Canterbury Tales: Prologue:*

> …a monk, when he is cloisterless;
> Is like to a fish that is waterless.

rock the boat

"Rocking the boat" means to disturb a stable situation, such as doing or saying something that will upset people or cause problems. As an example, "Harry is an easygoing manager; he won't rock the boat unless it's absolutely necessary."

This idiom alludes to capsizing a small vessel, such as a canoe, by moving about in it too violently. It became the title of a song, "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," in the popular musical comedy *Guys and Dolls* (1950) by Frank Loesser.

gully washer

A "gully washer" is an extremely heavy rainstorm that comes down fast and furious but usually lasts only a short time. The term arose in the Midwest and Southern states of the US, certainly by the late 1800s, but may have been used before that.

A "gully" is a large ditch or small ravine worn away by running water so that it essentially serves as a drainageway after prolonged heavy rains.

One of the first times the term was seen in print was 1898, in a family genealogy. The exact quote is: "It was a dry time, when a union service was held to pray for rain; a brother of another denomination arose, and after telling the Lord how dry it was, said, 'And now, Lord, send us rain: none of your drizzle-drozzle, but a regular grand soaker and gully washer.'"

of the first water

This old expression is used to say that something or someone is of the best quality, having the utmost skill or value. It's an allusion to the old system of grading diamonds, the most brilliant of which were deemed "of the first water."

If a diamond or pearl is of the first water it possesses the greatest possible degree of brilliance and translucence. In figurative use, however, the phrase can refer to someone or something regarded as undesirable. Sir Walter Scott's journal has, "He was a … swindler of the first water." (1826)

This comparison of diamonds with water dates back to at least the early 1600s, and Shakespeare alludes to it in *Tymon of Athens*, 1607. The 1753 edition of *Chambers' Encyclopedia* has this under an entry for 'Diamond':

"The first water in Diamonds means the greatest purity and perfection of their complexion, which ought to be that of the clearest drop of water. When Diamonds fall short of this perfection, they are said to be of the second or third water, etc. till the stone may be properly called a coloured one."

tip of the iceberg

To say that an object or a problem is only the "tip of the iceberg" means that what you can see is only a small part of the whole, that the rest of it is hidden.

Icebergs are large, floating chunks of ice detached from a glacier and carried out to sea. The phrase originates from the fact that only about 10 per cent of an iceberg is visible above the waterline; most of its mass is submerged

beneath the surface.

This characteristic of icebergs poses a significant danger to ships, as the unseen submerged part can cause damage. This was the case with the *RMS Titanic*, which sank in 1912. When it first hit the iceberg, the crew didn't know how serious the situation was because they couldn't see how the massive iceberg was shaped under the water. By the time they realized the danger, it was too late.

on the rocks

"On the rocks" is a phrase with three meanings:
—literally, shipwrecked atop rocks in a body of water
—poured over ice, usually in reference to alcoholic drinks
—in a bad state, particularly of a romantic relationship

In the early 20th century, bartenders began using the term to describe drinks served over ice cubes which are, of course, "the rocks." There's a theory, no doubt well-deserved, that this came from the idea of Scottish highlanders chilling their beverages with cold rocks from the river.

clear as mud

If something is "clear as mud," it's difficult to see or understand, not clear at all. "Well, that explanation is as clear as mud!"

The earliest known usage of the phrase dates back to the early 1800s. One of the first printed references to "as clear as mud" appears in *The Ingoldsby Legends* (1842) by R. H. Barham.

The idiom may have evolved from an earlier expression, "clear as a mud puddle," which means the same thing.

Another theory suggests that the phrase arose in the US as "clear as Mississippi mud," referencing the river's notorious lack of clarity. Whether the theory is true or not, this phrase has both alliteration and rhythm, which make it memorable.

What makes "as clear as mud" especially effective is its ironic contrast. The word "clear" normally denotes something easy to understand, but the addition of "mud" creates a contradiction. This inversion plays on expectations, making it a memorable way to describe confusion.

rain on someone's parade

To "rain on someone's parade" means to spoil that person's pleasure. "I hate to rain on your parade, but I think your A in chemistry was actually a clerical error."

This term, which calls up a vivid image of a downpour spoiling elaborate floats and dampening spirits, has been around since about 1900. Sheila Rule, reporting on a plan to replace Britain's House of Lords with an elected second chamber, wrote, "But the opposition Labor Party, which has long sought to rain on the Lords' political parade, is once again aiming at those men and women." (*New York Times*, 1990).

The imagery of rain disrupting a parade resonates across cultures and across centuries, as parades are often associated with celebration. Rain, since it is an uncontrollable natural element, serves as an apt symbol for unforeseen circumstances that can dampen spirits.

saving for a rainy day

"Saving for a rainy day" simply means to put money aside for a future time of need. To keep something for future use is a very old concept indeed; to call hard times a "rainy day" dates from the sixteenth century. Nicholas Breton used it in 1582 (*Works*): "Wise men say keepe somewhat till a rainy day." Ring Lardner (*Anniversary*, 1926) used it ironically: "Louis was saving for a rainy day, and his wife had long ago given up praying for rain."

tempest in a teapot

A "tempest in a teapot" (or "teacup") is a major fuss over a trivial matter, much ado about nothing. "I think you're making a tempest in a teapot over this. It's just a tiny scratch on the car! You can barely see it."

This expression has appeared in slightly varying forms for hundreds of years —a storm in a cream bowl (1678 letter from the duke of Ormond to the earl of Arlington), a tempest in a glass of water (the grand duke Paul of Russia, ca. 1790), a storm in a hand-wash basin (Lord Thurlow, ca. 1830), and, throughout much of the nineteenth century, a storm in a teacup (still preferred in Britain). In the twentieth century it changed to its present form, at least in America. Lord North, Prime Minister of Great Britain during the American War of Independence, is credited for popularizing this phrase as characterizing the outbreak of American colonists in 1775 against the tax on

tea.

His sense of humor was, perhaps, a little off.

The idea, however, originated long before those dates. Cicero, in the first century BCE, in his *De Legibus*, used a similar phrase in Latin, possibly the precursor to the modern expressions, "For Gratidius raised a tempest in a ladle, as the saying is." Then in the early third century CE, Athenaeus, in the *Deipnosophistae*, has Dorion ridiculing the description of a tempest in the *Nautilus of Timotheus* by saying that he had seen a more formidable storm in a boiling saucepan.

It appears that the phrase should really be, "bad weather in a domestic container of your choice."

any port in a storm

"Any port in a storm" means that any solution, however unappealing, is acceptable in times of trouble. "He can't afford today's high rents and though he doesn't want to be back living with his mum, I guess any port in a storm will do."

This saying originated as a nautical phrase, applied to a ship seeking shelter from rough weather. It has been used as a proverb from at least the mid-1700s.

The first known use of this proverb is in the English author John Cleland's bawdy novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749). Cleland's book is better known as *Fanny Hill*. Cleland goes to elaborate lengths to describe the events in the story, which are by any standards exceedingly lewd, in euphemistic language. That is the case in the extract where 'any port in a storm' is found.

It is widely believed that international maritime law allows mariners in distress to "lawfully seek shelter in the closest harbor, regardless of nationality." However, it is not clear that such a doctrine exists.

The variant "not just any port in a storm" has been used in a variety of contexts, including in reference to port wine.

every cloud has a silver lining

"Every cloud has a silver lining" suggests that no matter how bad a situation

might seem, there is always some good aspect to it.

John Milton appears to have been the originator of this metaphor, in *Comus: A Mask Presented* (1634): "A sable cloud turns forth its silver lining on the night." It was adopted by numerous later writers and so was already a cliché by the time it appeared in the popular World War I song, *Keep the Home Fires Burning* (Ivor Novello and Lena Guilhert, 1915). Noël Coward played on it in a song of the 1930s: "Every silver lining has its cloud."

A silver lining on a cloud is an indication that the sun is behind it. John Milton was obviously quite observant.

The proverb quickly gained public acceptance. It appears frequently in newspapers, on both sides of the Atlantic, from 1853 onward. This was probably due to the work of the American writer Sarah Payton Parton. She had been commissioned by the editor of the *Home Journal* magazine to write a weekly motivational essay on various topics, under the pen-name of Fanny Fern. These became very popular and Parton soon became the highest paid writer in the USA.

One of her best-known essays, published in 1853, was a piece of purple prose entitled *Nil desperandum*, which included "Every cloud has a silver lining" in the first line. Parton's first paragraph is very long, so here are just the last four lines, to give you a taste of what she was being paid top dollar for.

"The clusters of Hope may be seen with the eye of faith; your hand shall yet grasp them; your eyes revel, from the mountain top, over the green pastures and still waters of peace. You shall yet unbuckle your dusty armor, while soft breezes shall fan your victor temples. Nil desperandum!"

I don't know; I think you'd have to be pretty desperate to read more of such prose.

hold water

The Free Dictionary says there are three meanings for this phrase:
—to refrain from urinating
—to be calm or patient
—to be or appear to be true
"I don't think the lawyer's case holds much water."

The saying can be likened to a vessel that does not have holes in it and thus will not leak water. It's typically used in negative constructions.

Imagine a bucket full of holes, leaking water everywhere, and you will better understand the meaning of something holding water (or not!).

in deep water

To be "in deep water" is to be in a dangerous, vulnerable, or troublesome situation or position, especially one which could be beyond one's ability to resolve. If you can't swim and someone throws you into the deep end of the pool, you're in trouble.

A similar phrase, "to be in hot water," means almost the same thing.

like water off a duck's back

To say that something slides away "like water off a duck's back" means that the event, or the speech, doesn't have any significant, lasting, or apparent impact. "I'm not bothered by what she said. It's just water off a duck's back to me."

This expression, dating from the early 1800s, alludes to the way a duck's feathers shed water. Charles Kingsley used it in *The Water Babies* (1863): "When men are men of the world, hard words run off them like water off a duck's back."

Ducks' feathers are waterproof. The preen gland at the base of the tail produces oil that spreads and covers the birds' outer coat so that water forms droplets on, but does not permeate, the feathers. That's why a critical remark that doesn't bother the person for whom it was intended rolls off like water off a duck's back.

wet your whistle

"Wet your whistle" is an informal phrase that means to have a drink, especially an alcoholic one. The term "whistle" refers to the mouth or throat, and the expression suggests quenching thirst.

A similar phrase is to "whet your appetite," which is to sharpen your appetite. 'Sharpen' in this case means to encourage or incite, rather than literally sharpen, which you do when you whet a knife.

The verbs wet and whet share an identical pronunciation and, as homophones, have inevitably caused some confusion for writers. Examples of the misuse

are—unfortunately—fairly easy to find.

But the fact is that wet and whet are not interchangeable, and they have diametric connotations: wetting one's whistle "quenches" (thirst) while whetting one's appetite "stimulates" (the desire to eat, as well as drooling).

Medieval English poet Geoffrey Chaucer used whistle in this figurative way in *The Reeve's Tale*, when he penned,

> "As any jay she light was and jolly;
> So was her jolly whistle well wet."

In time, the set expression "to wet one's whistle" became commonly used with the meaning of "to take a drink (especially an alcoholic one)."

By the time gastronomic appetites were said to be "whetted," whet was firmly established in the English language. This being the case, it's slightly baffling as to why people would suddenly begin to misuse whet in the expression "to wet one's whistle"—but alas, the phenomenon is real, and it has persisted for centuries.

Wetting your whistle, on other hand, is refreshing, and eating a tasty appetizer to whet your appetite is, I hope, in the realm of possibility.

16 – Floating

float

The word "float" has been around since before the 1100s and has a great many uses. As a noun, it can mean:
—something that floats in or on the surface of a fluid, such as:
    a device buoying up the baited end of a fishing line
    a floating platform anchored near a shoreline
    a hollow ball that floats at the end of a lever in a cistern, tank, or boiler
    a sac containing air or gas and buoying up the body of a plant or animal
    a watertight structure giving an airplane buoyancy on water
—a tool or apparatus for smoothing a surface (as of wet concrete)
—a government grant of land not yet located by survey out of a larger tract
—a vehicle with a platform used to carry an exhibit in a parade
—the basic amount of money kept in a petty cash fund
—a soft drink with ice cream floating in it

As a verb, "float" can mean:
—to rest on the surface of or be suspended in a fluid
—to drift as if on a fluid: "yellow leaves floated down"
—of a currency: to find a level in the market without support
—to cause to float in or on the surface of a fluid
—to flood a cranberry bog
—to smooth (something, such as plaster or cement) with a float
—to put forth for acceptance: "float a proposal"
—to place (an issue of securities) on the market
—to borrow money: "float a loan"

It's the soft drink with ice cream floating in it that floats my boat. How about root beer and vanilla?

float an idea

To "float an idea" means to suggest something perhaps unusual or unexpected, with the objective of determining whether people like the idea or not. When you float an idea, you want to see what happens to it.

In the 19th century, "float an idea" meant to let it drift or seep into the mind.

Some people may want to "shoot down" the idea. This phrase seems to have developed fairly naturally from high level military strategy discussions. After all, ideas are usually floated in order to be shot at.

float like a butterfly, sting like a bee

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.
The hands can't hit what the eyes can't see."

This two-line poem was created by fighter Muhammad Ali to describe his fighting style. The "float like a butterfly" part of the phrase represents the grace and agility of the boxer, while the "sting like a bee" part represents the power and impact of his punches.

floating on air

If you're "floating on air," you're feeling very happy and euphoric, on cloud nine.

whatever floats your boat

If something "floats your boat," you find it exciting, attractive, or interesting. The origin of this phrase is unknown.

float a trial balloon

To "float a trial balloon" is very similar to "float an idea." It means something that is done or announced as a test in order to find out how people might react. It was defined in the early nineteenth century as a project or scheme tentatively announced in order to test public opinion.

The phrase alludes to the former use of balloons to get information about the weather.

Floating a trial balloon has resulted in a new term that appeals to me as a computer user. If a company floats a trial balloon about a new product and then finds the product is unworkable, it can be called "vaporware."

parade float

A "parade float" is a decorated platform, either built on a vehicle like a truck or towed behind one, and is a component of many festive parades.

Parade floats were first introduced in the Middle Ages. Churches used pageant wagons as movable scenery for passion plays. The wagons were pulled throughout the town, most notably during Corpus Christi in which up to 48 wagons were used, one for each play in the Corpus Christi cycle.

Parade floats are so named because the first floats were decorated barges on the River Thames for the Lord Mayor's Show.

A parade float may be decorated with any manner of artistic elements, usually according to the theme of the parade and may involve people performing or waving at the crowd from the moving platform. The Tournament of Roses Parade is famous for involving floats that are constructed only from plant materials. Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans are famous for the tossing of plastic beads to the crowd.

The Battle of Flowers parade in San Antonio, Texas is the only parade in the United States produced entirely by women, all of whom are volunteers. The parade is the oldest event and largest parade of Fiesta San Antonio. The original purpose of the parade was to honor the heroes of the Alamo.

In the Netherlands, flower parades are a popular tradition. The small country holds some 30 parades, large and small. The world's largest flower parade is held every year in Zundert, a small town in the south of the Netherlands. In most Dutch parades, floats are built entirely by volunteers, where hamlets compete with each other to build the most beautiful float, judged by an independent jury. Most Dutch flower parades are held in August and September and use mainly dahlia flowers. The dahlia fields are kept by volunteers as well.

dead man's float

The "dead man's float" is a maneuver used to help a person survive in a body of water for a long period of time. The person takes a deep breath of air, completely filling the lungs, which serves to buoy the body. The person then leaves his body face-down in the water in a "dead man" position until he or she must take the next breath.

Also known as the "jellyfish," the survival float is one of the most important skills for swimmers to learn.

milk float

A milk float is a small electric van with a roof and sometimes no sides, specifically designed for the delivery of fresh milk.

Milk floats, drawn by horses, were once common in many European countries, particularly the United Kingdom, and were operated by local dairies. However, in recent years, as the number of supermarkets and convenience stores stocking fresh milk has increased, many people have switched from regular home delivery to obtaining fresh milk from these other sources.

Because of the relatively small power output from its electric motor, a milk float travels fairly slowly. The floats are very quiet, suiting operations in residential areas during the early hours of the morning or during the night.

17 – Stack the deck

stack the deck

To "stack the deck" is to make arrangements that result in an unfair advantage over someone or something. "I can't get ahead at my office. Someone has stacked the cards against me."

This term, dating from the mid-1800s, comes from card playing. Stacking the deck is cheating by secretly arranging the deck of cards to be dealt out to one's advantage.

It has been used figuratively both in the sense of a dishonest maneuver or simply in the sense of describing odds in one's favor.

Incidentally, Shakespeare was the first to refer to a pack of cards as a deck – in *Henry VI, Part III*.

an ace up your sleeve

The phrase "an ace up your sleeve" refers to cheating at a card game by hiding a favorable card up one's sleeve (or wherever it can easily and quickly be accessed). The ace is the highest playing card in its suit in many card games, so a cheating player might well hide one to use against an unwary opponent. The term is related to "an ace in the hole."

Figuratively, "an ace up your sleeve" means a plan, a weapon, or a piece of information kept secret until it becomes necessary to use it.

The earliest European mention of playing cards appears in the medieval period, in 1371.

ace in the hole

If you have an "ace in the hole," you have a hidden or secret strength, an advantage that can supply a sure victory when revealed. For example, "The prosecutor had an ace in the hole: an eyewitness."

The term comes from stud poker, where each player is dealt one card face

down—the so-called hole card—and the rest face up. Should the hole card be an ace, the player has a hidden advantage. Hole here simply means "a hiding place." In the 19th-century American West, the expression was used to refer to a hidden weapon, such as a gun concealed in a shoulder holster. By the 1920s it had become a metaphor for any surprise advantage or leverage. The related "ace up one's sleeve" comes from the practice of dishonest gamblers who would hide a winning card.

The earliest printed citation available is from the Iowa newspaper *The New Era*, June 1886: "Thus matters went on until four cards lay in front of each man, face up and one turned down. Not a pair in sight and everyone thought each of the other men had an ace 'in the hole'."

in the weeds

The term "in the weeds" is used in several ways. It is said of a restaurant worker, completely overwhelmed with diners' orders and unable to keep up with the pace. Or it can apply to anyone overwhelmed with problems, troubles, or difficulties or who is totally preoccupied with details or complexities.

I had never, until now, heard of any of those definitions. To me, as a bridge player, the idiom was worded as "sitting in the weeds" because it applied to someone who held powerful cards when that fact hadn't been revealed by the bidding. I've always thought of it as hiding in the weeds, like an animal ready to pounce.

Also familiar is the golf term of "hitting one into the weeds," and in flying or driving, when the vehicle ends up in a field "in the weeds."

There is a theory that the term arose during Prohibition. The story goes that reserves of alcohol for most speakeasys weren't stored inside the establishment in case it got raided. If there happened to be a vacant lot or field nearby, alcohol was hidden there in sacks and covered with grass or leaves. When the bar got busy and the supply ran low, service would suffer because whoever was sent out to get the stuff wouldn't bring it back fast enough. When that happened, the bartender would go investigate and people would ask where the bartender went. "He's in the weeds" was often the answer even if he was in the john. After prohibition, "in the weeds" became a term for being really busy.

wild card

In card games, a "wild card" is a card that can be assigned any value or used to substitute for any needed card. The joker is often used as a wild card but other cards may be designated as wild by the rules or by agreement.

The term can also be used figuratively to mean:
—an unknown or unpredictable factor: "Taxes are the wild card in this election."
—in sports, a player or team chosen to fill a place in a competition after the regularly qualified players or teams have all been decided
—usually as "wildcard": a symbol (such as ? or *) used in a computer search to represent any letter or number

follow suit

Literally, to play a card of the same suit as that of the led card. Figuratively, it means to do the same thing as others, especially by following their example. "The people in front of us began to file out of the auditorium, and we followed suit."

The phrase comes from card games, where there are four "suits" (diamonds, hearts, spades, and clubs).

shuffle

To "shuffle" cards means to randomize a deck of playing cards to ensure an element of chance in card games. Shuffling is often followed by a cut, to help make sure that the shuffler has not manipulated the outcome.

Magicians, sleight-of-hand artists, and card cheats employ various methods of shuffling whereby the deck appears to have been shuffled fairly, when in reality one or more cards (up to and including the entire deck) stays in the same position. It is also possible, though generally considered very difficult, to "stack the deck" (place cards into a desirable order) by means of one or more riffle shuffles.

The word "shuffle" is used in many other ways, too:
—to drag your feet slowly along the ground as you walk
—to dance casually with sliding and tapping steps
—to shift from position to position
—to move things from place to place
—to play, or display (music or video files) in random order
—(archaic) to act in a shifty or deceitful manner
—(noun) a jumble: "The letter got lost in the shuffle."

If you get lost in the shuffle, you're lost in the crowd. If you shuffle off something, you get rid of it, whether it's an object or a responsibility. "Shuffle off" is also slang for leaving.

Shuffle Off to Buffalo is a song which was introduced in the 1933 musical film *42nd Street*, in which Ruby Keeler and Clarence Nordstrom sang and danced to it.

joker

To a card-player, a "joker" is a playing card, usually printed with a picture of a jester, used in certain games as the highest-ranking card or as a wild card. In some games, such as bridge, it's not used at all.

To the rest of the world, a joker is a joke-teller or practical joke-player, but you can also use this word when you're annoyed with someone who's acting ridiculous or foolish. "That joker in the convertible just ran a red light!"

It may mean a clause that is included in a legislative bill or a contract in order to render the bill or contract inoperative or oppressive in some respect while appearing to be innocuous until the harm has been done.

The phrase "there's a joker in the deck" is a figurative way of describing an unforeseen but important difficulty, fact, or circumstance.

The Joker is a supervillain appearing in American comic books. The character first appeared in the debut issue of the comic book Batman on April 25, 1940.

trump

In the card game of bridge, the trump card is the most powerful card in a particular round and defeats all the others. In French, *la triomphe* (meaning triumph, or to win) was the name of a card game is very frequent from the late 15th century.

The word "trump" comes from the French *triumphe*, (success in battle or other enterprise) and thence from Latin *triumphus* (a procession in Roman antiquity celebrating victory in war). A "triumph" was the highest military honor which a Roman commander could obtain.

"Trump" is an old word and has been used in several ways. In the late 13th century, it also meant "one who plays a trump, a herald." By the 1520s, it was

used figuratively as "one who or that which summons or proclaims" (trump of fame, etc.).

Today, "trump" means to outrank or defeat someone or something. Safety might trump appearance when you're buying a car, or your desires may trump your brother's when it comes to making weekend plans.

The word can also refer to a decisive overriding factor, a final resource, or a dependable and exemplary person. Eric Partridge lists "trump of the dump" as World War I New Zealand military slang for "person in authority in a particular place."

come up trumps

To "come up trumps" is to achieve success, especially in the face of adversity. "After our gig got canceled, I came up trumps by finding our band an even better one!" The phrase can also mean being especially generous or helpful.

"Come up trumps" is a variant of the older phrase "turn up trumps," which has been in use since the early 17th century. The word trump in this context is a corruption of triumph, which was the name of a card game, similar to whist, played in the 1600s.

In triumph, as in whist, the trump suit was selected at random by the 'cutting' of the deck. Trump cards temporarily outranked other cards. Selecting the right suit to match one's hand was an advantage in the game and so turning up trumps became synonymous with success.

By the 1700s, "turn up trumps" had begun to be used in its figurative sense, that is, with no direct reference to card playing. It is recorded that way in Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 1785: "Something may turn up trumps, something lucky may happen."

trump up

To "trump up" is to conceive, concoct, or devise some idea or piece of information in a fraudulent and self-serving manner. "He just trumped up the evidence for his proposal and hoped no one would investigate it."

When you hear about someone being arrested on "trumped-up charges," that means that they've been falsely accused. There's a sense of exaggeration in this term, as well—if your excuse for being late is trumped-up, you're concocting extra details to make it sound more plausible. "Trumped-up" was

first recorded in the early 18th century, and it comes from the idiomatic trump up, "devise deceitfully or dishonestly."

odds

The "odds" are the chances that something will happen. If you flip a coin, the odds are 50-50 you'll get heads. And 50-50 that you'll get tails. The odds are even.

When we talk about odds, we're talking about probabilities, specifically, how likely it is that something will happen. Is there a 5% chance? Is there a 95% chance? If there's a 95% chance, then the odds are great. We can talk about the odds of anything happening, as long as it hasn't happened yet. Anyone predicting the weather is telling the odds of rain or snow — they don't know for sure. If something strange happens people often say, "I can't believe that happened. The odds were against it."

In probability theory, odds provide a measure of the probability of a particular outcome. Odds are commonly used in gambling and statistics. For example for an event that is 40% probable, one could say that the odds are 2 in 5 or 2 to 3 in favor, or 3 to 2 against. When gambling, odds are often given as the ratio of the possible net profit to the possible net loss.

The term is also used to describe:
—A certain number of points given beforehand to a weaker side in a contest to equalize the chances of all participants.
—The likelihood of the occurrence of one thing rather than the occurrence of another thing, as in a contest. "The odds are that she will get the nomination on the first ballot."
—An amount by which one thing exceeds or falls short of another: "She won the election by considerable odds."
—Disagreement, variance: "Faculty and administration often are at odds on everything."

jackpot

A jackpot is a pile of money won during a game such as a poker or from a lottery. It's also any example of good fortune.

Originally, a jackpot was money bet in poker that accumulated until someone produced a pair of jacks (or something better). These days, a jackpot is any kind of prize, winnings, or success. If you get a high-paying job, you hit the jackpot. If you married a wonderful person, you hit the jackpot.

penny ante

"Penny ante" is a poker game in which the maximum bet or raise is a penny or other small amount. It's a game played just for fun. As an adjective, it means "small-time" or "two-bit."

The term originated in the bars and saloons of the American West. Miners and other laborers often played poker with whatever spare change they had, which was often just pennies.

Over time, the term began to be used more broadly to refer to any activity or situation that was considered trivial or of little significance.

card shark/sharp

A "card sharp" or "card shark" is a person who uses skill and/or deception to win at card games (such as poker). The phrase can be used in much the same way that "pool shark" or "pool hustler" refers to a skilled player who is not necessarily a cheater.

A sharp is an expert, but the noun phrase "card sharp" means not just an expert, but a cheat. The phrase is also spelled card-sharp and cardsharp. In fact, there's a sixteenth-century painting by the Italian painter, Caravaggio, called *Cardsharps*. In the painting, a card player is so engrossed in the game that he doesn't realize that a watcher is sneaking a peek at his cards and signaling to the card sharp, another player who has extra cards secretly tucked into his pants. The card sharp is going to cheat to win.

"Card sharp" is correct, but seeing it spelled "card shark" is common. In addition to being a sharp-toothed marine animal, the word shark has been used to mean "a dishonest person who preys on others" since the 1500s. A card shark might take a bite of your cards, but it's hard to play cards with fins.

Some word experts believe that 'card-sharp' and 'card-shark' may be independent coinages because of the existence of the two much earlier words 'sharping' (swindling or cheating – circa 1692) and 'sharking' (cheating, stealing or sponging – circa 1608). These terms for deceitfulness have been adopted into other phrases, for example 'sharp practice' and 'loan shark.' Tricksters were called both 'sharps' and 'sharks' well before the 19th century.

house of cards

A literal "house of cards" (also known as a card tower or card castle) is a structure built by balancing playing cards against one another and is easily toppled.

Figuratively, a "house of cards" is a flimsy structure, arrangement, plan, or situation that is in danger of collapsing or failing.

The phrase can be traced back to poet and writer, John Milton, who coined it in the 1600s. During that era, playing cards were viewed with suspicion and were even deemed sinful. So, when Milton used the phrase, he was not only highlighting the physical instability of a card house but also alluding to its moral fragility.

Literal card houses rely on nothing more than balance and friction in order to stay upright. No adhesives or other external connecting methods are used, and no damage or alterations are made to the cards themselves. Professional card stacker and trained architect Bryan Berg claims, however, that the more cards placed on a tower the stronger it becomes because the weight of the cards pushing down on the base (increasing friction) allows occasional cards to stumble without the entire structure collapsing.

The first known record-setting house of cards, a fifteen-story structure, was photographed for *The Strand Magazine* in September 1901. Since then, the records have shot up, with Bryan Berg of the US, achieving seventy-five stories on April 21, 1992.

Berg currently holds the world record for tallest house of cards, a 25-foot-9+7⁄16-inch "skyscraper" completed at the State Fair of Texas on October 14, 2007. He also holds the record for the largest house of cards, a category Guinness invented for the event, for a replica of Cinderella's Castle at Walt Disney World. In March 2010, Berg broke his own record by building a replica of The Venetian Macao resort hotel. He completed it in 44 days, using 218,792 cards (more than 4,000 decks). The structure measured 34.4 by 9.8 ft, and weighed more than 600 lbs.

I guess my feat of two cards propping each other up isn't going to cut it.

keep your cards close to your chest

To "keep your cards close to your chest" means to keep your plans or intentions secret from others. It originates from card games, where players hide the faces of their cards to prevent opponents from guessing that their strategy will be.

This phrase originated from America in the 1860s and was borrowed from the card game poker. "Close to the vest" was the original phrase. Players would hold their cards close to their chests so that their opponents would not get to see what values the cards had.

The opposite to this, of course, is to "put one's cards on the table" so that everyone can see what you have.

on / in the cards

The phrase "on (or in) the cards" means that something is likely to occur.

For example, when a couple has been dating for a year and spending more and more time together, we might say, "I think a wedding is in the cards." This suggests that their teaming up legally isn't just a vague possibility but an expected and logical next step.

In essence, when we use these phrases, we communicate a combination of observation, intuition, and anticipation about a future event or outcome.

The idiom has been in use since the late 1500s and traces its roots to the ancient divination practice of cartomancy, where fortunes were foretold using cards, such as tarot cards. In this tradition, if an event or outcome was said to be in the cards, it was predicted based on the arrangement and interpretation of the cards.

play one's cards right

To "play one's cards right" means to act sensibly, to make good use of one's resources. For example, "She played her cards right and got a promotion."

The idea comes from the fact that to win a hand in a card game, one must understand the strategy of the game and play the cards logically and well. The idiom dates to the mid-1700s.

hold all the aces

To "hold all the aces" (or "hold all the cards") means to be in a favorable or controlling position. "As the strike continues into its second week, it appears that the company holds all the aces in its negotiations with the strikers."

The idiom alludes to having possession of all four aces or all the high cards in a card game.

"Holding all the aces" was first published in a book titled *The Gambler* by Fyoder Dostoyevsky. But it was Edmond Hoyle, a British writer from London, England, who wrote a treatise about card games such as whist and its various versions, explaining strategy and how the various versions differed. Hoyle became, and still is, the go-to authority whenever card game strategy is discussed.

poker face

A "poker face" is an inscrutable face that reveals no hint of a person's thoughts or feelings.

This expression dates back to the second half of the 1800s. It comes from the card game poker. If poker player No. 1 has a strong hand and his opponents know it, they won't bet on their own hands. If No. 1 has a weak hand, and the others know it, they can just ignore him. If none of them know what No. 1 has in his hand, they have to guess and may lose money by making the wrong guess.

Therefore, poker players try to keep their faces completely blank, so that no one can tell whether their cards are good or bad. The same applied to bridge. As an experienced player, I can read useful information from my opponents' expressions.

according to Hoyle

If you do something "according to Hoyle," you adhere strictly to a set of established rules in that particular situation. In other words, you do it "by the book."

Edmond Hoyle (1672-1769), an English barrister and writer, published *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* in 1742. The book included not only the rules, but gave many insights into how to win at the game. He also codified laws for backgammon and was an authority on chess.

Hoyle and his books were so highly regarded that many writers plagiarized them. Or used his name on their own rule books, even for games that had not been invented by the time of Hoyle's death. Thus "Hoyle" became synonymous with any set of rules, at first only with card games, but later as a metaphor for the highest authority in all fields.

Edmond Hoyle is not the only writer who has been given the "according to" recognition. Others are:

According to Fowler — after Henry Fowler, the renowned lexicographer and author of *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 1926.

According to Guinness — after Norris and Ross McWhirter's *The Guinness Book of World Records.*

There was also a movie made back in the 1920s called *According to Hoyle*. It was a silent film that told the tale of a hobo who followed the apparent rules of how to be successful in life. I wonder if he ended up owning a railroad.

I checked Amazon and they carry a book, published in 1996, titled *According to Hoyle: Official Rules of More Than 200 Popular Games of Skill and Chance With Expert Advice on Winning Play*.

And there is, believe it or not, an *According to Hoyle Day*, August 29, when people are encouraged to honor the rules and regulations in particular situations. It's not known who came up with this day to commemorate Edmond Hoyle.

So why is it that when I play bridge according to Hoyle, I can still end up losing?

18 – Pull a fast one

pull

For a short little word containing only four letters, "pull" does a lot of work. As the verb "to pull," it can mean the following:
—exert force upon something to make it move toward the force
—stretch repeatedly: "pull taffy"
—strain abnormally: "pull a tendon"
—hold back (a racehorse) from winning
—work (an oar) by drawing back strongly
—draw from the skin: "pull feathers from a rooster's tail"
—pluck: "pull flowers"
—draw by the roots: "pull a tooth"
—draw apart: "pull away"
—print (something, such as a proof) by impression
—remove from a place or situation: "pull the pitcher"
—revoke: "If he drives drunk, he'll get his license pulled."
—bring (a weapon) into the open: "pulled a knife"
—perpetrate: "pull a robbery, pull a prank"
—assume: "pull a grin"
—act in the manner of: "pulled a Houdini and escaped"
—attract: "pull votes"
—obtain: "pulled a B in the course"
—get advantage over someone: "pull rank"
—use force in drawing, dragging, or tugging
—take a drink
—draw hard in smoking: "pulled at a pipe"
—strain against the bit
—feel or express strong sympathy: "pulling for my team"

As a noun, "pull" can mean any of the following:
—the act or an instance of pulling
—a draft of liquid
—an inhalation of smoke
—the effort expended in moving: "a long pull uphill"
—a competition: "a tractor pull"
—special influence: "he has pull at the office"
—a device for pulling something: "a drawer pull"
—a force that attracts, compels, or influences: "gravity"
—an injury from straining or stretching: "a muscle pull"

pull the plug

The literal meaning of "pull the plug" is to remove the stopper from a container. The figurative meaning is to bring something to an abrupt halt, for example, to stop giving money to support an activity. It can also mean cancelling a project, ending a relationship, or stopping some other process, such as a medical life-support system.

No one knows for certain when the term ‘pull the plug’ originated. Plugs in barrels, tubs and basins have been around for a long time, probably since humans began using containers to hold water.

The figurative meaning, however, may only have come after the invention of electricity. Household appliances with plugs weren't common until the early 1900s, with the first practical vacuum cleaner arriving around 1907 and the first toaster in 1909. The idiom "pull the plug" didn't become common in the US until the later 1920s.

pull an all-nighter

To "pull an all-nighter" means to stay up and awake all night for any reason, but particularly for work or studying. "He pulled an all-nighter to study for his exam." The phrase originated around 1870.

pull a face

To "pull a face" is to grimace, to twist your features in an unnatural way. This action is sometimes intended to be amusing and, at other times, to display disgust or dislike.

According to *Wikipedia*, a "face pull" is a weight training exercise that primarily targets the musculature of the upper back and shoulders and is considered an important exercise for shoulder health and stability.

pull ahead

To "pull ahead" means to take the lead in a race, competition, or contest. "The two runners were side by side until one pulled ahead."

It is also used to mean doing well or better than someone else when no

competition is involved. We often used the similar term "get ahead" to mean doing well economically. If one vehicle pulls ahead of another, it gets in front of it by moving faster.

pull a fast one

To "pull a fast one" is to try to deceive or fool someone in a quick yet daring or slick manner.

The Dictionary of American Slang cites a use in print in 1944 but doesn't explain the origin. The phrase could have originated with deception by sleight of hand, in which a victim is fooled by some movement too fast to see.

pull the rug from under

To "pull the rug from under" someone is to betray, expose, or leave them defenceless, or in a difficult situation. "If the banks opt to pull the rug from under the ill-fated project, it will go into liquidation."

Another way of describing the action is to say you are "blindsiding" someone.

As the imagery suggests, when someone has a rug pulled out from under them, they lose their stability. This is sudden, startling, and can be hurtful.

At the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the phrase "pull the rug from under" was traced back to 1936, in American English.

pull strings

To "pull strings" means to be in control of events or of other people's actions, often secretly, the way a puppeteer controls a marionette.

The phrase describes using one's status or influence to gain an advantage, usually in an unfair manner. It may be traced to the 1860s, and refers to puppetry, which employed the use of strings to make the puppets perform.

pull the trigger

To "pull the trigger" has the figurative meaning of making a decisive move or action, to commit to a course of action.

pull together

This phrase is generally interpreted to mean working in harmony, cooperating in a task or undertaking. Other meanings, with the addition of one or more words, are:
—to move or organize things closer to one another: "Please pull the desks together so we can use them as a table."
—to create or organize something: "I'm trying to pull a meeting together for Friday."
—to assemble or compile things from various places or sources: "I pulled together a menu from various cookbooks."
—to pull (oneself) together: "I have to calm down and think logically."

pull one's weight

To "pull one's weight" means to do one's share in a common task, or to work has hard as other people in a group.

pull rank

If I "pull rank," that means I'm asserting my authority over a subordinate who disagrees. The phrase can apply to any high position in a society, organization, or group. It originated, obviously, with the military.

pull out all the stops

When you "pull out all the stops," you do everything you possibly can to make something happen.

Every player on a basketball team has to pull out all the stops to win a challenging playoff game, and a preschool teacher might have to pull out all the stops almost daily to keep his class interested and happy. This phrase comes from the pipe organ. When a player pulls out all the stops, which means pulling out every knob so that air is allowed to blast through every rank as the organist plays, that creates a powerful blast of unfiltered sound.

"Bach was famous in his time not just as a great organist, but also as a great organ tester, and whenever he tried a new organ, his practice was to start off by playing with all the stops pulled out, that is, with every rank of pipes on-line at once." (Miles Hoffman, *The NPR Classical Music Companion*, 1997)

The pipe organ is thought to have been invented in the 3rd century BCE, but stops were not incorporated into the design until the late 15th century.

like pulling teeth

To say that something is "like pulling teeth" is to say that it is very difficult. The phrase is usually applied to getting someone to do something they don't want to do.

The idiom arose from dentists pulling teeth. In the past, this was done without anesthetic, so it was difficult and painful.

An example from 1831 published in the *Foreign Missionary Register of The American Baptist Missionary Magazine*:
"When any person is known to be considering the new religion, all his relations and acquaintance — rise en masse; so that to get a new convert is like pulling out the eye-tooth of a live tiger."

pull a Houdini

To "pull a Houdini" is to vanish or flee suddenly, so as to escape from someone or something. The phrase refers to US magician Harry Houdini, who was known for his ability to escape from things such as straitjackets, handcuffs, underwater chests, etc.

pull a rabbit out of a hat

If you do something surprising and seemingly impossible, in a way that has no obvious explanation, as if done by magic, we might say that you "pulled a rabbit out of a hat."

The phrase has a literal origin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The "pull a rabbit out of a hat" trick was a common spectacle where magicians literally pulled rabbits from apparently empty top hats, astonishing their audience. This trick became a staple in magic shows, symbolizing the element of surprise and the unexpected.

"The hand is quicker than the eye" is a phrase often used to explain magic tricks, including the famous rabbit trick.

pull your finger out

This phrase is primarily heard in the UK and means to stop dawdling or procrastinating.

Visitors to old sailing ships in the UK are likely to be told that the expression "pull your finger out" came about as an instruction to 'powder monkeys' (the young lads who loaded cannons on British Navy warships) to remove their finger from the cannon's fuse to allow the cannon to be fired.

This isn't true. The phrase began life in the early 20th century in Australia, as soldiers' slang. It was later taken up by the British Army. The first known use of it in print is in *Aussie: The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, March 1919 :

> "Tell the bloke who issues the prizes to pull his finger out."

What finger was being referred to and where it was supposed to be pulled out from, we can only speculate.

Another opinion appears in the *Dictionary of Catch Phrases: American and British, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day*, by Eric Partridge: "take (or pull or get) your finger out" originated about 1930 in the Royal Air Force and was adopted in 1941 or 1942 by the British army. The first edition of Partridge's book had the meaning as "Stop scratching your backside and get on with the job." The revised edition, having been enriched by further scholarship, offers a different meaning as the accurate one. It has to do with couples rather than individuals.

pull your socks up

If someone tells you to pull your socks up, they're either telling you to make an effort to improve your work or behavior, or that you'll look tidier.

pull yourself up by your bootstraps

To "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" is to improve your situation by your own unaided efforts.

We don't know the origin of this phrase. It refers to boots and the straps that some boots have attached to help the wearer pull them on and to the imagined feat of a lifting oneself off the ground by pulling on one's bootstraps. This impossible task is supposed to exemplify the achievement in getting out of a difficult situation by one's own efforts.

It was known by the early 20th century. James Joyce alluded to it in *Ulysses*,

1922.

Some early computers used a process called bootstrapping which alludes to this phrase. This involved loading a small amount of code, which was then used to progressively load more complex code until the machine was ready for use. This led to the use of the term 'booting' to mean starting up a computer.

19 – Making It

"To make" means to cause to exist or happen, to bring about or create. Humans are constantly making things happen, so the word has many, many uses as a verb. I have listed only the more interesting idioms using the word "make."

make no bones about

To "make no bones about" means to say something clearly and without hesitation, to state a fact in a way that allows no doubt.

Versions of this expression date back to the mid-1400s and the precise allusion is no longer known. Some believe it meant a boneless stew or soup that one could eat without hesitation.

It has been suggested that the "bones" were dice, which were previously made from bone and are still called bones in gambling circles. That explanation doesn't work because nothing found in print, thus far, connects the phrase in any way with gambling or dice. It seems reasonable to assume that dice are still called bones because they were once made of bone.

The earliest citation of the phrase in print comes from the *Paston Letters* (1459), relating to a dispute. The context is that the litigants are finally accepting a verdict with no objection.

'Making bones' is usually expressed in the negative, but has been used in a positive way. For example, from Richard Simpson's *The School of Shakspere,* (1878): "Elizabeth was thus making huge bones of sending some £7000 over for the general purposes of the government in Ireland."

I'd have made bones about that, too. In those days, £7000 was a lot of money.

make a killing

"Make a killing" doesn't mean to do a murder. This American phrase means to earn a lot of money in a short time and with little effort. Synonyms are "hit the jackpot" and "strike it rich."

According to *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* by Jonathon Green, "make a

killing" originated in the late 1800s to mean making a profit by gambling, whether at the races, on the stock market, in a casino, or elsewhere. The usage may stem from the notion of a hunter killing a large game animal, thus securing a substantial reward with a single action. The phrase does have ties to hunting. In the 19th century, hunters who successfully killed a large number of buffalo in a short period were described as having "made a killing."

make a clean breast of it

The expression "make a clean breast of it" means to tell the truth about something, to speak openly and honestly about something previously lied about or kept secret.

First recorded in 1752, the phrase uses "clean breast" in the sense of baring one's heart, the breast long having been considered the seat of private or secret feelings. The implication was that to disclose the truth was to clean one's heart of impurity.

These days, we are more likely to "get something off our chest," or to "come clean."

make a long story short

To "make a long story short" means to skip boring, extraneous, or unnecessary details; to get to the point.

Although the idea of abbreviating a long-winded account is ancient — the Roman writer Pacuvius used a similar expression in about 160 BCE — this precise phrase dates only from the 1800s. Henry David Thoreau played on it in a letter of 1857: "Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long time to make it short."

Thoreau obviously understood what it was like to do some serious editing.

make a mountain out of a molehill

"Making a mountain out of a molehill" means to make a slight difficulty seem like a serious problem.

This expression, alluding to the barely raised tunnels created by moles, was first recorded in John Fox's *The Book of Martyrs* (1570). The French equivalent, "make an elephant out of a fly," also first appeared in 1570.

make a virtue of necessity

To "make a virtue of necessity" describes the act of appearing to willingly do something that one, in fact, can't avoid doing. A synonym is "submit with good grace."

This expression first appeared in English in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*: "Then it is wisdom, as it thinketh me, to make virtue of necessity." Shakespeare also used it in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 1591.

make an ass of yourself

To "make an ass of yourself" means to behave foolishly and thus look silly.

This expression is first found in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Nights Dream* (1600), in which the weaver Nick Bottom has his head magically transformed into that of a donkey by the fairy Puck.

make common cause

To "make common cause" means to cooperate with someone, often otherwise deemed to be an enemy, to work together to fight, prevent, or thwart someone or something. The phrase was used as early as the 17th century in reference to a shared aim.

make ends meet

To "make ends meet" or to "make do" means to be thrifty so that you have enough money to pay for the things that you need. It means to get by, to break even, though you may have to live without things you'd like to have.

It is not known exactly where the phrase originated but it has been in use for centuries. One of the earliest examples of the idiom can be found in Thomas Fuller's *The History of the Worthies of England* (1661): "Worldly wealth he cared not for, desiring only to make both ends meet."

make haste

The phrase "make haste" is an old one and means to hurry or act quickly. We

also say, "make it snappy."

"Make haste" was first recorded in Miles Coverdale's 1535 translation of the Bible. Shakespeare later used it in *King John* (1595) and in several other plays.

To "make haste slowly," dating from the mid-1700s, is a translation of the Latin *festina lente*. It is used either ironically, to slow someone down (as in "You'll do better if you make haste slowly"), or to comment sarcastically on a lack of progress. "So far the committee has been making haste slowly."

make light of

To "make light of" or "make little of" means to treat something as unimportant, or to joke about it.

"To make light of," which uses light in the sense of "trivial," was first recorded in William Tyndale's 1526 Bible translation.

make like a tree and leave

To "make like a tree and leave" is a playful way of telling someone to go away, hit the road, make tracks. It relies on the double meaning of the word "leave," which can mean both "depart" and "a part of a tree."

The exact origins of the idiom remain unclear, but it seems to have originated as a child's joke around 1955. It's memorable because the visual imagery conjures the likeness of a tree, which is stationary and rooted, juxtaposed with the action of leaving, creating an incongruent picture in the listener's mind.

The phrase gained significant attention and became well-known after its inclusion in the 1980 film *Back to the Future*. Since then, the phrase has entered common language.

make love not war

The anti-war slogan "make love, not war" is commonly associated with the American counterculture of the 1960s. It was used primarily by those who were opposed to the Vietnam War, but has been invoked in other anti-war contexts since, around the world.

The earliest uses in print appear to have been in anti-war protests in Berkeley,

California early in 1965.

make or break

"Make or break" describes a crucial factor in determining the success of something. Such a factor will cause either total success or total ruin. For example, "This assignment will make or break her as a reporter."

This rhyming expression, first recorded in Charles Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (1840), has largely replaced the much older (1500s) alliterative synonym "make or mar."

all work and no play make Jack a dull boy

This old proverb means that without time off from work, a person becomes both bored and boring.

Though the spirit of the proverb had been expressed previously, the modern saying first appeared in James Howell's *Proverbs* (1659). It was newly popularized after the phrase was featured in *The Shining*.

Some writers have added a second part to the proverb, as in *Harry and Lucy Concluded* (1825) by the Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth:

> All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,
> All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy.

fake it till you make it

"Fake it till you make it" suggests that if you simply imitate the confidence and competence which you need, you will develop those qualities in your real life.

It's also called "kidding yourself."

The earliest reference to a similar phrase occurs in the Simon & Garfunkel song *Fakin' It*, released in 1968. Simon sings, "And I know I'm fakin' it, I'm not really makin' it."

Similar advice has been offered by a number of writers over time. This is from William James, *The Gospel of Relaxation, On Vital Reserves* (1922).

> "…action and feeling go together, and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the

feeling, which is not. Thus, the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. If such conduct does not make you soon feel cheerful, nothing else on that occasion can. So to feel brave, act as if we were brave, use all our will to that end, and a courage-fit will very likely replace the fit of fear."

Also in the 1920s, Alfred Adler developed a therapeutic technique that he called "acting as if," asserting that "if you want a quality, act as if you already have it." This strategy gave his clients an opportunity to practice alternatives to dysfunctional behaviors. Adler's method is still used today and is often described as "role play."

A 1988 experiment by Fritz Strack claimed to show that mood can be improved by holding a pen between the user's teeth to force a smile, but a later experiment failed to replicate it, due to which Strack was awarded the Ig Nobel Prize for psychology in 2019.

Which he well and truly deserved.

haste makes waste

Rushing into an action or decision can cause mistakes that waste more time than would have been taken by proceeding more carefully. Thus, your haste has made you waste time and perhaps other things as well.

The advice is first found in the Tudor scholar Nicholas Udall's 1542 translation of the proverbs of Erasmus. Udall gave his book a grand title: *Apophthegmes that is to saie, prompte, quicke, wittie and sentencious saiynges, of certain emperours, kynges, capitaines, philosophiers and oratours, aswell Grekes, as Romaines, bothe veraye pleasaunt [et] profitable to reade, partely for all maner of persones, [et] especially gentlemen. First gathered and compiled in Latine by the ryght famous clerke Maister Erasmus of Roterodame. And now translated into Englyshe by Nicolas Vdall.*

That's a title and a back page blurb all in one!

A few years later John Heywood included the proverb in his 1546 glossary, *A Dialogue conteinyng the nomber in effect of all the Prouerbes in the Englishe tongue.*

That title is much shorter. Perhaps the editor had a word or two to say.

might makes right

"Might makes right" means that in human society, the stronger and more powerful rule others and determine what is deemed right and wrong because no one can stop them.

A similar thought is "History is written by the victors."

Some philosophies hold that a society's strongest members should rule and determine its standards of right and wrong, as well as its goals for the greater good.

The idea, though not the wording, has been attributed to the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written around 410 BCE by the ancient historian Thucydides, who stated that "right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

In the first chapter of Plato's *Republic,* authored around 375 BCE, Thrasymachus claims that "justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger," which Socrates then disputes. Callicles in *Gorgias* argues similarly that the strong should rule the weak, as a right owed to their superiority.

Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union campaign address (1860) reverses the phrase: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it." He spoke in defense of neutral engagement with slave-holders, as against violent confrontation.

The fact remains that the powerful rule, but whether or not they are right is another question.

practice makes perfect

This proverb claims that if you practice an activity long enough, you will master it.

This advice began as "use makes perfect." In English it dates from the 1400s but probably was a version of a much older Latin proverb. It exists in many languages, so presumably most people agree. Ralph Waldo Emerson almost did: "Practice is nine-tenths," he wrote in *Conduct of Life: Power* (1860).

20 – Playing With Fire

sure-fire

To say that something is "sure-fire" is to say that it's bound to be successful or perform as expected.

Originally, the term was an American modifier for a reliable or accurate firearm. By the 1840s, it was being used metaphorically as a synonym for "guaranteed." There are more than 40 active SUREFIRE trademarks in the US trademark database for such non-firearm products as hunting knives, pharmaceutical reagents, and vacation timeshares.

firing squad

A "firing squad" is a group of soldiers detailed to
—fire volleys over the grave of one buried with military honors
—carry out a sentence of death by shooting

Execution by shooting is the most common method of execution worldwide, used in about 70 countries, with execution by firing squad being one particular form. In most countries, execution by a firing squad has historically been considered a more honorable death than say, hanging, and was used primarily for military personnel.

A firing squad is normally composed of several soldiers, all of whom are usually instructed to fire simultaneously, thus preventing identification of who fired the lethal shot. The prisoner is typically blindfolded as well as restrained and may be either standing or sitting. There is a tradition in some jurisdictions that such executions are carried out at first light or at sunrise, giving rise to the phrase "shot at dawn."

Sometimes, one or more soldiers of the firing squad may be issued a rifle containing a blank cartridge. In such cases, soldiers of the firing squad are not told beforehand whether they are using live ammunition. This is believed to reinforce the sense of diffusion of responsibility among the firing squad members. In practice however, firing a live round produces significant recoil, while firing a blank does not.

A single shot by the squad's officer with a pistol (coup de grâce) is sometimes

incorporated in a firing squad execution, particularly if the initial volley turns out not to be immediately fatal. Before the introduction of firearms, bows or crossbows were often used.

The method is often the capital punishment or disciplinary means employed by military courts for crimes such as cowardice, desertion, espionage, murder, mutiny, or treason.

circular firing squad

A "circular firing squad" is used to describe a situation in which a group of people are engaged in self-destructive internal conflicts and mutual recriminations. It's often applied to a political party that is allied against a common enemy or opponent but whose internal disagreements and attacks end up doing more damage to themselves than to their target.

In the 1970s, a New Mexico newspaper published a letter containing the phrase circular firing squad, "in which members of the squad will kill all that is worthwhile within the circle as well as themselves in the cross-fire."

caught in the crossfire

The phrase "caught in the crossfire" literally means you are in the middle of an exchange of gunfire. Figuratively, it's used to mean that you are forced to be involved in a conflict or issue that you are not a part of.

To be "caught in the crossfire" is an expression that often refers to unintended casualties (bystanders, etc.) who were killed or wounded by being exposed to the gunfire of a battle, such as in a position to be hit by bullets from either side. The phrase has come to mean any injury, damage or harm (physical or otherwise) caused to a third party due to the action of belligerents.

add fuel to the fire

To add fuel to the fire or the flames means to make an already bad situation worse, as by increasing anger, hostility, or passion. The Roman historian Livy used this turn of phrase (in Latin) nearly two thousand years ago, and it was repeated (in English) by numerous writers thereafter, among them John Milton (*Samson Agonistes*, 1671). The phrase remains in common use.

baptism of fire

A "baptism of fire" is one's first encounter with a severe ordeal or painful experience and may, in some cases, be regarded as a rite of passage.

The term is believed to come from the death of martyrs, especially those who were burned at the stake.

In the 1800s, it acquired a more specific meaning in France, that is, the experience of a soldier's first battle. 'Baptism' because battle is new to him and 'fire' because he is 'under fire' from guns. It was so used by Napoleon III in a letter describing his son's initiation into combat. Later it was extended to mean any initial encounter with a difficult situation—as, for example, one's first job interview.

The first printing of the actual phrase as we now use it in English is in George Lawrence's *Guy Livingstone*, 1857: "It's only in their baptism of fire that the young ones shrink and start."

firing line

The "firing line" is the forefront of an activity, used especially in the phrase "on the firing line." It may be:
—the line of positions from which gunfire is directed at targets
—a position where one is subject to criticism or blame

Originally, in about 1839, 'firing line' referred to a long fuse used to ignite a mine explosion. In the 1850s, it took on two new senses: a line from which guns are fired at targets, and the front line of troops in a battle. Those two newer senses inspired *Firing Line*, the name of a public-affairs talk show hosted by conservative pundit William F. Buckley that ran from 1966 to 1999 on US television.

too many irons in the fire

Having "too many irons in the fire" means having too many activities or undertakings at the same time. For example, "Bill's got too many irons in the fire to cope with moving this year."

This expression originally referred to a blacksmith heating too many irons at once and therefore spoiling some in the forging.

hold someone's feet to the fire

To "hold someone's feet to the fire" means to insist that that person fulfill his promises or obligations.

The idiom is derived from the trial by ordeal used by the Inquisition during Medieval times. Quite literally, one's feet were held to a fire or one was forced to walk barefoot over hot coals in order to extract a confession of wrongdoing. Over time, the idiom took on a looser meaning and is often used simply to indicate pressure or demand that someone live up to their responsibilities, commitments, or agreements.

The term is often applied to politicians. Holding their feet to the fire means constantly reminding them of their campaign promises and the duties of their office. These reminders may be a form of torture, but the point is that by keeping their feet to the fire we make sure they won't forget.

trial by fire

A "trial by fire" means:
—exposing a person to flames to assess their truthfulness, courage etc.
—a soldier facing enemy fire as a test of his fortitude
—any ordeal which tests one's strength, endurance or resolve

In other words, a situation in which a person is placed under extreme pressure or stress as a means of testing his ability to learn or perform.

The expression originated from a medieval practice known as "ordeal by fire." This was a type of trial where innocence or guilt was determined by forcing dangerous, often horribly painful tasks onto the accused, like walking over hot coals, sometimes while holding a heated iron. The crazy belief was that divine intervention would protect the innocent if they were actually innocent.

The Salem Witch Trials serve as an example of ordeal by fire. Women accused of being witches would be tied to a post and a fire lit at their feet. If the woman was a witch, she'd burn. If she wasn't a witch, she'd be saved from the flames.

There was also a trial by water used in the same way. The accused woman would be tied up and tossed in the water. The belief was that a witch would float, and an innocent woman would sink. If the woman sank, they'd yank her up by the rope. But often it was too late and the woman was dead by drowning.

playing with fire

Playing with fire literally means using fire as a toy, experimenting with flames and fire. Figuratively, it means taking foolish risks. or courting danger.

This metaphor has been around for hundreds of years. Poet Henry Vaughan put it this way in 1655 (*The Garland)*:

> "I played with fire, did counsell spurn …
> But never thought that fire would burn."

under fire

If you're "under fire," you're being shot at or rigorously criticized.

The literal use of the phrase has been in use since the early 1700s. Originally it meant to be in the range of enemy fire. Now it often means being within range of angry critics.

fire away

To "fire away" means:
—to begin shooting at an enemy
—to begin to talk or present information quickly

The phrase is often used to tell someone they may begin talking or asking questions. For example, "You've got more questions? Well, fire away."

This expression originated in the 1600s as a military command to discharge firearms and was being transferred to other actions by the late 1700s.

friendly fire

"Friendly fire" has two definitions. First, it can be fire burning in a place where it was intended to burn, although damages may result. Second, in a military conflict, it is the discharge of weapons against one's own troops. From *Murphy's Military Laws*: "Friendly fire ain't!"

A fire burning in a fireplace is regarded as a friendly fire, in spite of the fact that extensive smoke damage might result. A bonfire is friendly fire, until a sudden wind spreads it to surrounding structures.

Unintentional harm to civilian or neutral targets is sometimes referred to as

collateral damage rather than friendly fire. Training accidents and bloodless incidents do not qualify as friendly fire in terms of casualty reporting. Friendly fire should also not be confused with fragging, which is the uncondoned intentional (or attempted) killing of servicemen by fellow personnel serving on the same side.

The *Oxford Companion to American Military History* estimates that between 2 percent and 25 percent of the casualties in America's wars are attributable to friendly fire.

draw someone's fire

To "draw someone's fire" means to attract hostile criticism or judgment. For example, "His recent article was bound to draw fire." Another quote from *Murphy's Military Laws*: "Don't be conspicuous. In the combat zone, it draws fire. Out of the combat zone, it draws sergeants."

This expression uses the verb draw in the sense of "attract" or "provoke," and transfers fire in the sense of "gunfire" to a somewhat milder attack.

fire in the belly

William Safire describes it best. Fire in the belly is "an unquenchable thirst for power or glory; the burning drive to win a race or achieve a goal. As a political phrase, the expression is usually used to indicate a Presidential candidate's desire to win, particularly the willingness to endure the long contest. It first appeared in print in 1882, in an essay by Robert Louis Stevenson. The source of the expression is not known. Perhaps this metaphor for ambition comes from stoking a potbellied stove or from the fiery sensation of heartfelt heartburn." (*Safire's New Political Dictionary* by William Safire (Random House, New York, 1993).

Or perhaps from drinking too much rye whiskey.

all fired up

"All fired up" means feeling very excited and eager about something. You are ready, willing, and able, and can't wait to get started with the task ahead of you.

This is unlikely to happen when it's housework calling you.

hang fire

If something is "hanging fire," it's delayed, perhaps awaiting a decision.

This expression originally referred to the 17th-century flintlock musket, where the priming powder ignited but often failed to explode the main charge, a result called hanging fire.

light a fire under someone

Lighting a fire under someone means motivating them to work harder or more efficiently, take action, or be more enthusiastic. For example, "The team has been a little unproductive lately so I'm hoping this promise of bonuses will light a fire under them."

there's no smoke without fire

If you say "there's no smoke without fire," you're saying that there's usually at least some truth behind a rumor, suspicion, or bad sign. Otherwise, why would that rumor, suspicion, or bad sign exist?

The idiom "there's no smoke without fire" has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and has evolved over time to become a popular saying in English. Its origin lies in the belief that where there is smoke, there must be a fire, and it is often used to suggest that a rumor or suspicion may have some truth to it.

The rumor that I am going to make shortbread cookies is totally unfounded. That smoke is from somebody's cigarette.

fan the flames

When you physically fan the flames of a fire, you add more air to it and encourage it to burn hotter and stronger. In an idiomatic sense, it means you cause emotions or feelings in a situation to intensify. For example, "The politician's comments only served to fan the flames of the protest."

The phrase is not always used for negative situations. You might also fan the flames of love.

The fact that wind stirs up a fire has, of course, been known since ancient times, but the precise metaphor here, with its alliterative lilt, is considerably

newer. Dickens used it in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840).

set the world on fire

To "set the world on fire" means to do wonderful or exciting things that cause a great or remarkable sensation in the world and thus become extremely popular and famous. The phrase is often used in the negative to indicate the opposite. "I'll never sing well enough to set the world on fire."

A similar idiom is "set the Thames on fire." This phrase also signifies an extraordinary achievement that surpasses expectations. It implies a level of ambition, passion, or talent that has the potential to change the current state of affairs.

the fat hit the fire

The phrase "the fat hit the fire" is a polite substitute for "the shit hit the fan."

The imagery isn't bad. When fat is added either to a hot pan or directly to a fire, there is an explosive reaction. But it simply doesn't have the impact of imagining the effects of shit being thrown into an electric fan.
The use of either idiom alludes to the messy and hectic consequences brought about by a previously secret situation becoming public. This is the point at which things become suddenly very chaotic, difficult, or disastrous.

Electric fans were invented in the 1880s, so the expression was likely coined soon after. It did not appear in print until after World War I. The 1967 edition of Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* lists the phrase as Canadian, circa 1930.

The more polite forms of the phrase, which involve eggs, pie, soup and 'stuff' hitting the fan, can certainly be dated from the US circa the 1940s. The popularity of an idiom can often be measured by the number of variants it spawns. With this one, the variants are mostly "polite" versions of the explicit original. For example, 'when the solids hit the air conditioning,' and 'when the pooh hits the punka wallah.'

burn your fingers

When you "burn your fingers," you do something that results in hurting you. Many of us have burned our fingers on a hot stove, but the figurative meaning involves not only physical damage, but also emotional, or financial hurt.

Examples: "She burnt her fingers meddling in the wedding arrangements," and "He burnt his fingers investing in cryptocurrency."

The phrase is also used as a forewarning by someone who has been "burned" in the past.

burning question

A "burning question" is an urgent or crucial issue under heated discussion. For example, "Real estate taxes are always a burning question for the town leaders." The word 'burning' in this sense can also be used to describe anything that comes with a strong sense of urgency and importance.

The term comes from the 1800s and relates particularly to the discussion of important public issues. There are versions in French and German, but in English one of the best-known examples is Benjamin Disraeli's use of it — "the burning question of the day" — in a speech in the British House of Commons in 1873.

One theory suggests that the origins of "burning question" go back to ancient times when fire was used as a means of communication. In that era, lighting a fire on a hill or other high place served as a signal to convey urgent messages over long distances.

Newspapers in the 1800s often used phrases like "Burning Question: Will War Break Out?" to capture readers' attention and highlight pressing issues.

burn rubber

A good example of a driving idiom, to "burn rubber" is to drive very fast. More specifically, it means to accelerate so intensely that the vehicle tires spin, produce smoke, and leave traces of burnt rubber on the road. "We thought we were going to be late so we had to burn rubber to get here on time."

The exact origin of the idiom "burn rubber" is uncertain, but it is believed to have emerged in the mid-1900s during the rise of the American car culture. Since then, the idiom has become a symbol of rebellion, freedom, and youthful exuberance, as it is closely tied to the image of fast cars and adrenaline-filled pursuits.

burn one's bridges

Literally, to "burn one's bridges" means to destroy a bridge, or a boat, or a path behind oneself, so that others cannot follow. Figuratively, it means to do something that cannot be easily undone or reversed in the future (often because one has behaved offensively or unfavorably). For example, "I think you really burned your bridges when you announced you were quitting and proceeded to insult your boss in front of the whole staff."

To burn one's bridges is to commit oneself to an irreversible course of action, without possibility of backing down. The expression comes from ancient military history, when soldiers crossing a river literally burned the bridge or boats they had used in order to cut off the possibility of retreat. It is said the great Caesar, in 49 BCE, commanded his legions to burn the bridges behind him after crossing the Rubicon (another idiomatic term used today to declare there is no turning back). In doing so, he both kept his army from turning back and also made it more difficult for anyone behind him to follow.

By burning bridges behind them, Roman armies only had two choices: be victorious or die.

crash and burn

To "crash and burn" is to badly fail in a spectacular, often public way. For example, "I think I'm going to crash and burn in the tournament! Have you seen who I'm playing next?"

Literally, of course, to crash and burn means to crash and catch fire, typically said of a car or an airplane. Figuratively, it means to fail at something completely and dramatically.

old flame

Your former romantic partner would be described as an old flame, especially if you still have feelings for him or her.

The origin of the idiom "an old flame" is believed to come from the literal meaning of the word "flame," which can refer to a burning passion or intense emotion. In this sense, an old flame would be a past love or romantic interest that may still hold a strong emotional attachment or memory.

This idiom has been used in literature and music for centuries, with references dating back to the 1500s. It became more popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in romantic novels and songs. The idiom is often used to

portray a sense of longing for a past romance or to evoke feelings of nostalgia.

spread like wildfire

To "spread like wildfire" means to spread or propagate very quickly and widely.

The phrase arises from the rapid spread of a literal wildfire in countryside grass or forest, which can be very difficult to control. The noun wildfire means "a raging, rapidly spreading conflagration."

The analogy to less concrete matters was drawn by about 1800. Benjamin Disraeli used it in *Venetia* (1837): "The report … spread like wild fire through the town."

It can be used in various contexts, such as the rapid spread of a contagious disease, the swift dissemination of news or rumors, or the quick adoption of a trend or idea. The phrase is often used to emphasize the speed and wide reach of the dissemination, highlighting the lack of control or containment.

firewater

"Firewater" is a slang term for very strong alcohol, especially whiskey. It is an American expression that seems to have arisen in the early 1800s. For example, "The men had finished a hard day's work and were happy as they passed a bottle of firewater around the table."

21 – Old

old as dirt

"Old as dirt" means extremely old. If we assume that dirt has been around since the Earth was formed, this phrase means someone or something old as dirt has existed for roughly 4.5 billion years.

old as Methuselah

If you're as "old as Methuselah," you're very old. But not nearly as old as dirt.

Methuselah was a biblical patriarch and a figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is claimed to have lived the longest life of any human, dying at 969 years of age.

The phrase can be traced back to at least the 14th century. An allusion to it is cited as circa 1390 in F. J. Furnivall's *Minor Poems*, 1901.

old as the hills

Being as "old as the hills" is probably the same as being old as dirt. The term refers, presumably, to geological time, when mountains were first formed.

The phrase derives from the Bible, Job 15:7. It was alluded to in Miles Coverdale's Bible, 1535: "Art thou the first man, that euer was borne? Or, wast thou made before the hylles?"

so old it's got whiskers

If something, such as a story or joke, is said to be so old that it's got whiskers, that means we've all heard it at least a hundred times.

This usage could be extended to apply to anything notoriously old and well-known. And the 'whiskers' don't relate to facial hair. It means the mold (think penicillin) growing on food that is old and rotting.

Too much information!

money for old rope

Getting "money for old rope" means getting a profitable return for very little effort.

A common explanation (quite false) says that the phrase originated in reference to the payment for old, frayed ropes which were subsequently used to fill cracks between planks on sailing ships.

Gaps between planks on ships were indeed filled with a material called caulk, which was made largely from hemp soaked in tar. The killer blow to the common explanation is that the phrase wasn't known in English until the 1930s, well after the heyday of sailing ships. It can't date from much earlier than that since it appears nowhere else in print.

The definitive dictionary of sailors' language dating from the 'days of sail' — *The Sailor's Word-Book: an alphabetical digest of nautical terms*, by Admiral William Henry Smyth — has no mention of the phrase.

"Money for old rope" is most likely to have originated in a similar manner to "money for jam." This was a British Army expression from around WWI. The reference is to the ubiquity of jam in the soldiers' diet and the fact that it had little value. "Old rope" had the same status. "Money for old rope" just means 'easy money.'

same old same old

The phrase "same old same old" means a familiar, uninteresting, or tedious situation, activity, narrative, etc. The phrase is duplicated for emphasis.

there's no fool like an old fool

Old people, who are expected to know better, often do outrageously foolish things, especially regarding romantic liaisons. Because we expect old people to be wise, such actions seem worse than young persons behaving foolishly.

This proverb is first found in John Heywood's 1546 glossary, *A Dialogue conteinyng the nomber in effect of all the Prouerbes in the Englishe tongue*.

age before beauty

To say "age before beauty" is a humorous way to tell someone to go ahead of you, meant as a playful insult.

This phrase is traditionally used when inviting another individual to pass through a doorway before one. Eric Partridge described it as a mock courtesy uttered by a young woman to an older man. Currently it is used only ironically or sarcastically.

According to an old story, it was said rather snidely by Clare Boothe Luce when ushering Dorothy Parker through a doorway, and Parker replied, "Pearls before swine."

A related cliché is "after you, Alphonse—no, after you, Gaston," repeated a number of times. This version is based on a comic strip by Frederick Burr Opper, *Alphonse and Gaston*, which was popular in the early 1900s, and pokes fun at exaggerated politeness.

The origin of this expression is unknown. It was certainly in use by the mid-Victorian period; it is recorded in print from at least as early as 1869 (in the *Decatur Republican* newspaper) and is probably significantly earlier than that.

old chestnut

An "old chestnut" is an idea, story, or joke that has been discussed or repeated so often that it isn't funny anymore.

The phrase has only an indirect association with chestnut trees or their fruit.

It may have come from an 1816 melodrama called *Broken Sword*, by the playwright and theatrical manager William Dimond, performed at the Royal Covent Garden Theatre, London. The play contained this exchange:

Zavior: "I entered the wood at Collares, when suddenly from the thick boughs of a cork tree…"
Pablo (jumping up): "A chesnut, Captain, a chesnut… Captain, this is the twenty-seventh time I have heard you relate this story, and you invariably said 'a chesnut,' till now."

In the 1880s, many American newspapers began using 'chestnut' in the way we do now, to refer to hoary, oft-repeated stories, and the term became established in the common lingo thereafter. The 'old' was added later as an intensifier.

old fogey

The term "old fogey" is used now to describe a person who is old and conservative in either attitude or appearance or both.

The expression arose in the late 1700s, used then to refer specifically to old and infirm soldiers. "Fogey" may have been derived from *foggy*, a Scots dialect word meaning mossy or decrepit, or from *fogram*, meaning a superannuated person or fuddy-duddy.

Too old and infirm to undertake active service, old fogies were used to recruit younger men. The first example of it being used with that meaning is found in the London newspaper *The Morning Post*, April 1793: "During the last week, a recruiting party of the Old Fogies had decoyed a number of young lads, by means of intoxication, &c. at which the friends and comrades of the deluded recruits were exceedingly displeased and disgusted."

In the 1800s, 'old fogey' began to be used outside a military context, to refer to someone who was old-fashioned or out of touch. Soon afterwards, things changed again, with the emergence of the term 'young fogey,' a name given to people of antiquated beliefs and appearance but who weren't old.

old habits die hard

The saying "old habits die hard" reflects the genuine difficulty most people face when trying to alter behaviors they've been practicing for years. These habits become automatic routines embedded into lifestyle and thought processes.

This common proverb has been traced back centuries with variants across different cultures. An early version appears in playwright George Farquhar's 1706 work *The Recruiting Officer*: "Old soldiers, brother, never die; they only fade away. Habits are stubborn things, especially habits of youth."

Human beings gravitate toward the familiar and comfortable. Even destructive habits provide a sense of stability and order amid the chaos of life. Long-established routines like smoking, drinking, or overeating provide instant gratification. We don't want to change those habits because it means losing coping methods that have always been reliable crutches to lean on, as well as enjoyable.

The human brain functions through well-entrenched neural pathways that are wired by repeating behaviors over time. Specific triggers automatically activate associated actions without any conscious thought.

These ingrained cause-effect sequences make old routines extremely hard to disrupt. The brain will keep prompting the same impulse until the neural connections are actively rewritten through new practices.

The related phrase, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" expresses a similar idea.

old hat

If something is "old hat," it's out of date, old-fashioned, or over-used.

The term 'old hat' began to be used in the early 1900s. It may have developed because in the times when it was usual for women to wear hats, the fashions in hats used to change very quickly.

old school

"Old school" is a phrase that can refer to that which is considered antiquated or old-fashioned, or else to that which is remembered fondly or nostalgically.

This informal phrase dates back to the 1800s and is of English origin. It can be found in print in the 1852 version of the classic novel *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. It means that something or someone is behind the times or out of date with current trends or thinking.

Old school means something close to old-fashioned, but it's a term with more pride behind it. If someone says, "I'm old school," they're saying they do it like it used to be done, which they believe was a better way. For example, an old school teacher might prefer not to use computers in class.

old soldiers never die, they just fade away

The proverb "Old soldiers never die, they simply fade away" is the notion that, long after they have outlived the wars they fought, old soldiers are forgotten and their passing ignored.

An early version appears in playwright George Farquhar's 1706 work *The Recruiting Officer*: "Old soldiers, brother, never die; they only fade away. Habits are stubborn things, especially habits of youth."

The expression was mentioned in Siegfried Sassoon's *Counter-attack and*

Other Poems, which was published in 1918.

It then drifted into obscurity but was given a new lease of life when the US general Douglas MacArthur used a variant of it in his farewell address to Congress in 1951: "Old soldiers never die — Young ones wish they would."

There are many funny variants of the expression, which I love, even if they are old hat:
Old academics never die, they just lose their faculties.
Old accountants never die, they just lose their balance.
Old actors never die, they just lose their parts.
Old bankers never die, they just lose interest.
Old beekeepers never die, they just buzz off.
Old bookkeepers never die, they just lose their figures.
Old bowlers never die, they just end up in the gutter.
Old bridge players never die, they just shuffle away.
Old computer techs never die, they just lose their memory.
Old cooks never die, they just get deranged.
Old doctors never die, they just lose their patience.
Old electricians never die, they just lose contact.
Old foresters never die, they just pine away.
Old golfers never die, they just lose their balls.
Old lawyers never die, they just lose their appeal.
Old librarians never die, they just lose their references.
Old pilots never die, they just go to a higher plane.
Old postal carriers never die, they just lose their zip.
Old railroaders never die, they just derail.
Old salesmen never die, they just go out of commission.
Old sculptors never die, they just lose their marbles.
Old watchmakers never die, they just lose time.
Old wrestlers never die, they just lose their grip.
Old writers never die, they just run out of ink.

There is no conclusive evidence about what happens to old skeptics, but their future is doubtful.

22 – Food

food for thought

"Food for thought" is an idea, issue, or remark worth pondering. This metaphoric phrase, transferring the idea of digestion from the stomach to mulling something over in the mind, dates from the late 1800s, although the idea was also expressed somewhat differently at least three centuries earlier. It was used by Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 1889.

dingleberry

"Dingleberry" sounds as though it might be something edible, or least something kind of cute, but these definitions deny any such fantasy:

—a foolish, stupid, or contemptible person
—a cranberry (*Vaccinium erythrocarpum*) of the southeastern US
—a piece of dried fecal matter clinging to the hair around the anus

couch potato

A couch potato is a lazy person who lies on the couch and watches a lot of television rather than having an active life. Originally, the phrase relied on a pun with 'tuber' in the slang term 'boob tuber,' which referred to someone devoted to watching the boob tube or television.

bun fight

A bun fight (also spelled bun-fight or bunfight) is a British expression for a tea party or other formal function. Less often, it refers to a heated argument or exchange. The oldest known use is in the 1920s but we don't know who invented it.

A bun fight sounds as if it might take place in a children's nursery, with the kids squabbling over buns and muffins. But it usually refers to formal engagements, for which people have to dress up and behave decorously. For example, "The annual meeting of the Institution of Electrical Engineers, at

which black tie and decorations are de rigueur."

Bunfight at the OK Corral is a wacky Wild West pantomime. Belle Bottoms has just taken over The Tumbleweed Saloon in Dodgy City, along with its current staff, Molly Coodle and Butch Casserole. When Molly's father Fester suddenly strikes gold, the Frisco Kid and his outlaw gang hatch a plan to steal the deeds to his goldmine. And after many comedy twists and turns, the action culminates in a comedic showdown at The OK Corral.

Another use of the term for entertainment is *Bunfight at the O.K. Tea Rooms,* an episode of the British comedy television series *The Goodies*.

full of piss and vinegar

Being "full of piss and vinegar" means having an abundance of boisterous, youthful energy, enthusiasm, or rowdiness.

This phrase may have been coined earlier, but the first time it's found in print is in a 1936 novel by John Steinbeck titled *In Dubious Battle*. "Listen, mister," London said, "them guys is so full of piss and vinegar they'll skin you if you show that slick suit outside."

One source might be from *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce. "All wind and piss like a tanyard cat." In context, this phrase is usually taken to mean empty talk, full of bombast.

The 1920s, known as the Roaring Twenties, was a period of economic prosperity and exuberant optimism, and many phrases meaning vitality and energy were coined. So it may be that the phrase was born in that era.

just fell off the turnip truck

Someone who just fell off the turnip truck is naive, gullible, inexperienced, easily fooled, ignorant, or unsophisticated.

This idiom is often used in the negative as a way of expressing that a person is not foolish or gullible. An equivalent expression is "I wasn't born yesterday."

In Ireland, the expression is, "I didn't just float up the Liffey on a lily," the Liffey being the river that flows through Dublin and 'lily' a shortened version of lily pad.

apple of discord

An "apple of discord" is an object or topic which sows dissention, anger, or jealousy. It's the core of a quarrel, a small issue that could lead to a bigger argument.

In Greek mythology, the Apple of Discord was a golden apple dropped by Eris, the goddess of strife, at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. It was inscribed with the words, "to the most beautiful." It sparked a vanity-fueled dispute among Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite as to which of them was the most beautiful and therefore entitled to the apple. This led to the Judgement of Paris and ultimately the Trojan War.

don't cry over spilled milk

This saying means that you shouldn't regret what's done and can't be changed. After all, stressing and agonizing over insignificant occurrences like dropping a glass of milk and the other little issues that inevitably arise just in the course of each day never accomplish anything.

Our modern version of the advice originated with "No weeping for shed milk," which appears in two seventeenth-century proverb collections (James Howell, 1659; John Ray, 1678). The idea is so well-known that just the words "spilled milk" convey the entire cliché.

like turkeys voting for Christmas

"Turkeys voting for Christmas" is an idiom originating in the UK and used as a metaphor for a situation in which a choice made is clearly against one's self-interest. Around 10 million turkeys are eaten at Christmas in the UK and very few at any other time of the year. In North America, we could also have turkeys voting for Thanksgiving.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Humorous Quotations* writes that a commentator in the Independent Magazine traced the origin of the phrase to a British Liberal Party politician in 1977.

In Canada, the story of Mouseland has mice voting for cats. A similar German idiom is "Only the most stupid calves would vote for their butchers." The expression "like turkeys voting for Christmas" has since become idiomatic of people who face adverse consequences of their own authoritarian, cruel, or unjust policies.

when life gives you lemons, make lemonade

This proverb is used to encourage optimism and a positive can-do attitude in the face of adversity or misfortune. Lemons suggest sourness or difficulty in life; making lemonade is turning them into something positive or desirable.

Its first known print use, as attributed to writer Elbert Hubbard in 1909 in *Literary Digest*, reads: "A genius is a man who takes the lemons that Fate hands him and starts a lemonade-stand with them."

A poetic rendition of the phrase entitled *The Optimist* appeared in a 1940 edition of *The Rotarian*:

> Life handed him a lemon,
> As Life sometimes will do.
> His friends looked on in pity,
> Assuming he was through.
> They came upon him later,
> Reclining in the shade
> in calm contentment, drinking
> A glass of lemonade.

you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs

This proverb claims that sometimes you have to do unpleasant things in order to complete a task or meet a goal.

It originated in a country known for making omelettes — France. The saying was adopted into English soon afterwards. The Dublin-based news-sheet *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* published a piece in 1786 which described the activities of François de Charette.

Charette was a Royalist counter-revolutionary in the French Revolution. Someone said to him that he had caused the death of a great many persons. "Yes," he replied, "omelettes are not made without breaking eggs."

Naturally, no one who says this ever thinks they will be one of those proverbial eggs.

winner, winner, chicken dinner

Bingo! Jackpot! Winner winner chicken dinner! This exclamation is used to celebrate a small victory, especially in gambling.

The exact origin of the phrase is unknown, but it may have come from gamblers. The most popular origin story is that in the 1970s, some casinos in Las Vegas offered a chicken dinner as a promotional item for winning a bet at the blackjack tables. When a player won a hand, they would receive their winnings and a chicken dinner, leading to the expression "winner winner, chicken dinner." However, the author of a book on craps lingo has said that the term comes from back-alley gamblers during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The phrase gained mainstream popularity thanks to its frequent use in the 2008 casino heist film *21*.

"Winner winner chicken dinner" also saw popularity online after the release of the 2017 multiplayer shooter video game *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG). Game developer Brendan Greene included the phrase in most of the battle-royale modes he has created. If a player manages to be the sole survivor of the notoriously difficult game of PUBG, they are greeted with the poultry praise upon victory. Many websites use it to introduce chicken recipes and, in the UK, a gambling game.

A couple of entrepreneurs in Ontario do it best. "Winner winner chicken dinner" is the name of their food truck, which serves chicken, of course. There are only two items on their elegant menu: chicken bites and cauliflower bites. And two sides: french fries and deep fried pickles.

Deep Fried Pickles? Really? There is such a thing?

clam up

To "clam up" means to become silent, to stop talking, often because you are embarrassed or nervous. For example, "Whenever I ask my husband where he was that day, he clams up." The term alludes to the tightly closed valves of a live clam.

throwing salt over the shoulder

"Throwing salt over the shoulder" is a superstition involving the idea of warding off evil personified as the Devil.

This superstition has more to do with etiquette than warding off bad luck. In ancient times, salt was expensive, so precious that, in some civilizations, it was even used as currency. Spilling salt was tantamount to throwing away

money, and only the devil would cause someone to act with such foolishness. Tossing a pinch over your shoulder would blind the devil and make him think twice about trying to trick you again.

"He is not worth his salt" is a common expression. It originated in ancient Greece where salt was traded for slaves. The early Greeks had a saying that "no one should trust a man without first eating a peck of salt with him," the moral being that by the time one had shared a peck of salt with another person, they would no longer be strangers.

Transporting salt has always been a problem because it is bulky and low priced. Salt from Syracuse, NY (nicknamed Salt City) was brought to Chicago by way of the old Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. As early as 1848, the canal was known as "the ditch that salt built."

corn

Corn is another word with multiple uses, perhaps because it's involved so much with food and drink.

In agriculture, the word means:
—the main cereal plant of a region
—the seeds of such plants, especially after harvesting
—a single seed of such plants, a grain
—a tall annual grass, Zea mays, (Indian corn or maize)
—the grain of this plant, used for food, fodder, and as a source of oil

In cookery:
—to preserve in brine
—to salt

Combined with other words:
—sweetcorn: a variety of Indian corn
—popcorn: a variety of Indian corn "turned inside out"
—cornfield: a corn garden.
—peppercorn: the grain (or berry) of the pepper plant
—barleycorn: barley grain
—corn whisky: whiskey distilled from corn
—corn snow: snow melted and refrozen into a rough granular surface
—flint corn (also known as calico corn) is a variant of maize or Indian corn. Each kernel has a hard outer layer to protect the soft endosperm, likened to being as hard as flint.

Slang:

—something (such as writing, music, or acting) that is corny.

Originally, the English word corn meant any rounded grain or seed whatsoever. In particular, it was used to refer to the kind of grain most often grown in a certain region. Thus in England, a cornfield is usually a field of wheat; in Scotland, a field of oats. The pretty blue cornflower is not maize, but a Eurasian weed that originally plagued fields of wheat. To modern North Americans, however, corn means maize—that is, the plant Zea mays and its seeds. When they first encountered Zea mays in the 1500s, the English borrowed the Spanish term for the grain, maíz. Later, in the 17th century, another term for maize appears, Indian corn—the word Indian here meaning "native to the Americas." The American word corn, referring to "maize," is simply a shortening of Indian corn.

tea leaf

I'll bet you thought that a "tea leaf" is a dried fragment of the tea plant leaf used in making a tea drink. Well, it is. But it's also used to mean a thief.

This comes from cockney rhyming slang, because the word 'leaf' in tea leaf rhymes with 'thief.'

"Who keeps taking all the pens? I think we have a tea leaf in this office!"

movable feast

A "movable feast" is a religious holiday, such as Easter, which falls on the same day of the week each year, but changes in date from year to year.

Over the centuries there have been many disputes over how the date of Easter should be calculated, involving differing views concerning the calendar and religious observance. This rather complex canonical rule is the one used now in the Christian Church: "Easter Day is the first Sunday following the first ecclesiastical full moon (which is the 14th day of an astronomical new moon) that occurs on or after the day of the Vernal Equinox (March 21st)."

Okay, if you say so.

"Movable feast" has been adopted into the language as a metaphor for things which change over time. Ernest Hemingway's posthumously published memoirs of his life in 1920s Paris, called *A Moveable Feast*, did much to bring the term to the general language: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays

with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."

23 – Greenery

hard row to hoe

A "hard (tough) row to hoe" means a task or a course that is difficult and/or lengthy.

The row in this expression is a line of planted crops, and hoe is a "tool with a thin flat blade on a long handle, used to cultivate, weed, or loosen the earth around plants." This expression is sometimes found written (or said) as a "hard road to hoe," which is incorrect, since we use a hoe to cultivate gardens, not roads.

This metaphor comes from nineteenth-century America, when most people lived in rural areas and cultivated at least some land. David Crockett used it in his *Tour to the North and Down East* (1835).

sow one's wild oats

To "sow one's wild oats" is to indulge in wild, foolish, and promiscuous behavior in one's youth. The underlying metaphor is that of sowing useless wild grasses instead of grain to cultivate for food.

The wild oat (*Avena fatua*) is a common tall plant that looks like its relative, the cereal plant oat, but is really a pernicious weed that infests the agricultural fields of Europe and North America and is difficult to eradicate. The wild oat's uselessness has been known since ancient times. The expression has been traced back to the Roman comic Plautus in 194 BCE and was probably used before his day. It usually refers to a young man frittering his time away in fruitless dissipation and is always said indulgently of the young.

feeling one's oats

The expression "feeling one's oats" means to be very active and energetic, to be aware of one's own power or importance. It can be used for a person of any age, but is probably more commonly applied to the young.

It dates back to the early 19th century and is used for the frisky, energetic movements of a horse when it has a belly full of oats. The earliest example

recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* comes from the *Boston Transcript* in 1831.

separate the wheat from the chaff

To separate the wheat from the chaff means to distinguish valuable people or things from worthless ones, to distinguish the wanted from the unwanted. It is what happened literally in the ancient agricultural practice of winnowing, or exposing wheat to the wind so that the chaff blew away and the grains remained.

The relevant definition of chaff is "the glumes, husks, or other seed coverings or small pieces of stems or leaves (as of grains and grasses) separated from the seed in threshing or processing." It is something that must be separated from the edible wheat. Chaff is also occasionally used in a figurative sense, meaning "something comparatively worthless."

put out to pasture

This phrase has several meanings:
—to force (someone) to leave a job because of old age
—to take animals to a large area of land to feed on the grass there
—to retire a piece of equipment or replace it with something newer

This term, which refers to animals that are turned out to a meadow or range, particularly a horse that is too old to work, was transferred to human beings as early as the sixteenth century. John Heywood used it in his 1546 proverb collection.

Farmers have been putting animals out to pasture for many hundreds of years now. In some cases the phrase was used simply to indicate bringing the flock or herd out to feed for the day, and in other cases it indicated that a particular animal was being retired from work, due to age or infirmity, and sent to the pasture to graze and relax.

bed of roses

A "bed of roses" is used to describe a situation or activity that is comfortable or even luxurious. This metaphor is often used in a negative context, such as, "Going to work every day is no bed of roses."

Anyway, a bed of roses is not unqualified bliss, considering all the fussy care

roses need—removing faded blossoms, pruning, spraying, and dusting.

The expression was used by several poets. Here are lines in Christopher Marlowe's poem *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*, published posthumously in 1599. Marlowe died in 1593, stabbed to death.

By thorns, perhaps?

> And I will make thee beds of roses
> And a thousand fragrant posies,
> A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
> Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.

When I was young, I thought that "bed of roses" meant the kind of bed humans slept in, made entirely of soft, satiny, fragrant rose petals, on which I could lie in complete ecstasy. The idea was appealing until I realized that "bed" meant garden bed.

grasp the nettle

To "grasp the nettle" means to tackle a difficult problem in a bold manner, despite the difficulty or short-term adverse consequences.

Stinging nettles are common everywhere. The plant is able to inject toxins into the skin of any person or animal who brushes against its stiff, hollow hairs. If you grasp the plant firmly, in the direction the hairs are growing, the hairs tend to be pushed flat and avoid penetrating the skin.

Aaron Hill's Works, circa 1750, contains an early example of the phrase:

> Tender-handed stroke a nettle,
> And it stings you, for your pains:
> Grasp it like a man of mettle,
> And it soft as silk remains.

nip something in the bud

Nipping something in the bud means putting a quick end to it, before it can develop into something more significant or frustrating.

"Nip in the bud" derives from the de-budding of plants. When a leaf or flower is beginning to form, it's just a little bud, and if you nip it — cut it — then it won't grow.

The phrase's earlier version was "nip in the bloom." It is cited in a romance written by Henry Chettle in 1595. The current version of the phrase first appeared in 1607, in a comedy of manners called *The Hungry Courtier or The Woman Hater* by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher.

put down roots

To "put down roots" is to establish oneself, or to feel like, a permanent resident in a certain place. This metaphoric expression, first recorded in 1921, likens the rooting of a plant to human settlement.

grassroots

"Grassroots" is a term that can mean the origin of something or people at the most basic level of an organization, movement, or locale. For example, "Their campaign started at the grassroots."

Grassroots movements are associated with bottom-up, rather than top-down decision-making, and are sometimes considered more natural or spontaneous than traditional power structures.

Reading and writing are grassroots elements of education. Grassroots is where things begin and grow, like your lawn and the dandelions that decorate it.

backwoods

The word "backwoods" refers to heavily wooded, uncultivated, thinly settled areas or partly cleared territory on the frontiers. Sometimes the word is used to imply cultural backwardness, but some of us don't care. For example, "He loves living in the backwoods of Montana and goes fishing and hunting every day."

What's not to like?

deadwood

"Deadwood" can refer to dead branches on a tree, useless personnel or material, or bowling pins that have been knocked down but remain on the alley.

out of the woods

The term "out of the woods" means being out of danger or likely to recover or prevail over trouble or illness. It's usually used in the negative, as in "We're not out of the woods yet."

This expression, alluding to having been lost in a forest, dates from Roman times. It was first recorded in English in 1792.

head for tall timber

If you're heading for "tall timber," you're running away to hide. It is associated with fleeing into a forest to hide among trees and bushes. Example: "When the police came looking for them, they headed to tall timber to escape."

heart of oak

A "heart of oak" is said to belong to a very emotionally or mentally strong person. It can also mean to be courageous. The heartwood of the oak tree is the solid central part of the oak tree traditionally used for timber for ships.

Heart of Oak is the official march of the Royal Navy. It is also the official march of several Commonwealth navies, including the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal New Zealand Navy. The music was written in 1759 by composer William Boyce, the lyrics by actor David Garrick, for a pantomime first performed on New Year's Eve of that year at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London.

can't see the forest for the trees

When you "can't see the forest for the trees," you are so focused on the details of something that you fail to see the whole picture, to understand the larger plan or principles. "Alex argues about petty cash and overlooks the budget—he can't see the forest for the trees."

This proverbial saying is first found in Sir Thomas More's *Confutacion of Tyndals Answere*, 1533. John Heywood's proverb collection in 1546 has it this way: "Ye cannot see the wood for the trees."

This phrase is particularly useful in highlighting the need for perspective in various aspects of life, from personal relationships to professional projects. I

guess you could say, "Don't sweat the small stuff."

four-leaf clover

The four-leaf clover is a rare variation of the common three-leaf clover. According to traditional sayings, four-leaf clovers bring good luck, though we don't know how this idea began.

The druids of the ancient Celtic world carried four-leaf clovers around to ward off malevolent spirits. This practice evolved into a medieval theory that a four-leaf clover would give you the ability to spot fairies and take evasive action if necessary. As a result, back in the Middle Ages, kids entertained themselves by finding four-leaf clovers and heading out for a fairy-hunt.

Normally, four-leaf clovers have a frequency of approximately 1 in 5000, according to a 2017 survey of approximately 7 million clovers. The same survey found that the frequency of five-leaf clovers is 1 in 24,400, and of six-leaf clovers is 1 in 312,500.

Researchers from the University of Georgia reported finding the gene that turns ordinary three-leaf clovers into the coveted four-leaf types. There are reports of farms in the US which specialize in four-leaf clovers, producing as many as 10,000 a day (to be sealed in plastic as "lucky charms" by introducing a genetically engineered ingredient to the plants to encourage the aberration.

Clover is a type of pea and is valued by farmers for a few reasons: cows like eating it, bees like its nectar, and the plant itself likes nitrogen. That's to say, clover is very good at pulling nitrogen from the air and rooting it in the ground for other plants to eat. There are 300 species of clover, but the best one for the soil is white clover, or *Trifolium repens*.

24 – Miscellaneous

miscellaneous

Something "miscellaneous" is made up of an odd collection of things — things that don't seem to go together. A breakfast bar, a DVD, and a credit card bill are miscellaneous items that might be in a backpack.

The word comes from the Latin word *miscere*, meaning "to mix." Similarly, miscellaneous can describe something with many variations.

Synonyms for "miscellaneous" are: mishmash, multifarious, kitchen sink, raggle-taggle, odd lot, odds and ends, potpourri, and a mixed bag.

ugly as sin

"Ugly as sin" means physically or morally hideous. For example, "That dog is ugly as sin." This simile, first recorded in 1801, replaced the earlier "ugly as the devil." The phrase may have been derived from the Christian belief that sin is ugly.

ruff

"Ruff" is an old word (circa 1500s) and has several meanings. As a noun, it's used for:
—a high, frilled collar of pleated muslin or linen worn by men and women of the late 1500s and early 1600s. (In this case, ruff may be a shortened version of "ruffle.")
—a fringe or frill of long hairs or feathers growing around or on the neck of an animal.
—a common Eurasian sandpiper, the male known for a large, ornamental collar of feathers.
—an exhibition of pride or haughtiness (obsolete).
—wanton or tumultuous procedure or conduct; disturbing or disarranging something.
—a low, fast, vibrating beat of a drum, not so loud as a roll; a ruffle.
—a collar on a shaft or other piece to prevent endwise motion.
—a small freshwater fish of the perch family.
— a game similar to whist, and the predecessor of it (1590-1630), from

French *roffle* or *romfle*, or *triomphe* (a triumph, a victory), from Italian *ronfa*, which is perhaps a corruption of *trionfo* (triumph)."

As a verb, "ruff" has the following definitions:
—to take a trick with a trump
—to play a trump when unable to follow suit
—to ruffle an animal's fur

As an example of onomatopoeia (echoism), which is a word that imitates the sound it describes, is "ruff ruff." Just as "buzz" imitates the sound a bee makes, "ruff ruff" imitates one of the sounds a dog makes. A website about dogs says that this is a "stutter-bark at a mid-range pitch," and means "Let's play!"

As a bridge player, I was curious about where the term "ruff," meaning to take a trick with a trump, originated. I knew it also referred to a collar, both human and animal, but all the other meanings came as a surprise.

Bridge can trace its ancestry at least to the early 1500s in England when prototype forms of whist were played under such names as triumph, trump, ruff, slam, ruff and honors, whisk and swabbers, whisk, and whist. Bridge players everywhere may be surprised to learn that the game of "cross-ruff" was mentioned in a 1592 publication.

"Whist" may have referred to the rapid action of sweeping up the cards after winning a trick, or a call for silence. The game was popular under its modern name of whist by the middle of the 1600s, but it was not until 1742 that the first book devoted to whist appeared: Edmond Hoyle's famous *Short Treatise on Whist*. This rapidly became a best seller and, as a quick check on Google shows, it's still selling.

If "ruff" originated from "triumph," then it follows that ruffing my opponents' ace is a triumph. But hey! I already knew that.

tartar

The word "tartar" has several meanings.

—a crusty deposit that builds up on teeth
—the substance left behind after wine fermentation, which is refined into cream of tartar, used to make baking powder
—one who is formidable or powerful
—one of irritable or violent temper, fierce and strict
—tartar sauce, a condiment

Capitalized, the word again has a variety of applications.
—Tartar (horse), a racehorse
—Tartarus, in Greek mythology, a place in the underworld
—Tartarium, an expensive Middle Ages fabric also known as Cloth of Tars
—Tartar Sauce, a swear word for SpongeBob SquarePants
—Tartar or Tatar, a Turkic or Mongolian invader of Asia in the Middle Ages. The Tartars were a combined force of central Asian people which established a vast empire under the leadership of the warlord Genghis Khan, and were a byword for ferocity. Historically, the term Tatars (or Tartars) was applied to anyone originating from the vast Northern and Central Asian landmass then known as Tartary.

The form "Tartar" has its origins in either Latin or French, coming to Western European languages from Turkish and the Persian language (tātār, "mounted messenger"). From the beginning, the extra 'r' was present in the Western forms and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* this was most likely due to an association with Tartarus.

thespian

A "thespian" is an actor, a theatrical performer. The word comes from Thespis, a 6th century BCE Greek poet, who is considered the father of Greek tragedy. The literal meaning of the name is "inspired by the gods."

Greek drama was originally entirely performed by choruses. It's believed that Thespis became the first actor when he jumped on a wooden cart and recited lines from his poetry as if he was the character saying those lines, instead of a poet reading a poem. Then he went around from town to town with his costumes and props. Which, of course, makes him the first touring actor as well.

wainscoting

The original definition of wainscoting in the 14th century was "a fine grade of oak imported for woodwork." By the late 1500s, it had become a verb meaning "to line with boards or paneling," usually referring to the lower three or four feet of an interior wall when finished differently from the remainder of the wall. The oak wood was first used for wagon building and coachwork.

In early days, wainscoting was used to cover up unwanted dampness in the lower part of the wall and, as well as oak wood, marble and cloth (linen or cotton) were used. In the 1900s, it was so popular as decoration that a lot of

homes were built having dining rooms with near floor to ceiling wainscoting.

Today, wainscot is regarded as both decorative and useful, keeping walls safe from damage and blemishes in heavy-traffic areas like entryways, stairways and hallways. Think of children with sticky fingers and chairbacks crashing into walls, and you will understand the purpose of shielding paint or wallpaper with this protective layer.

a chip off the old block

A "chip off the old block" means a person who closely resembles a parent. For example, "Like her mother, Karen has very little patience—a chip off the old block."

This term, with its analogy to a chip of stone or wood that closely resembles the larger block from which it was cut, dates from ancient times (Theocritus, *Idyls*, c. 270 BCE). In English it was already a proverb by the 17th century.

kid

The noun "kid" can refer to any of the following:
—a child or young person
—one's son or daughter, regardless of age
—one's younger siblings: "my kid brother"
—one younger or less experienced: "the kid on the pro golf tour"
—a young goat, antelope, or similar animal
(A pregnant female goat is said to "be in kid.")
—leather made of the skin of a young goat
—(nautical) A small wooden mess tub in which sailors received their food

A few synonyms: chick, child, cub, juvenile, moppet, squirt, youngster.

As a verb, "kid" can mean any of these:
—to say untrue things in a playful or joking way
—to gently criticize or tease in a good-humored way
—to engage in good-humored fooling or horseplay
—to bring forth young, used of a goat or an antelope

A few synonyms: chaff, joke, josh, razz, rib, roast, tease.

Sometimes the word is used as a form of address:
—Hey, kid!
—You'd better listen to me, kid, because I'm the boss.

We have been using "kid" to refer to a human child for more than three hundred years now. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that although this word was considered "low slang" when it first began being used, it had entered "familiar speech" by the 1800s. Therefore, in contemporary English, "kid" is neither slang nor improper. It is, however, definitely informal.

The word originated from Middle English *kide*, of Scandinavian origin, akin to Old Norse *kith kid*. The first known use was in the 13th century.

Idioms:
kid around — engage in playful fun, tease and joke
kid oneself — delude oneself about something
new kid on the block — a new arrival in a place, group, or organization
kid stuff — appropriate for children; something very simple or easy
kidlike — resembling kid leather or a child
whiz kid — a person unusually intelligent or successful at an early age

kidding

There can be a world of meaning in punctuation, as evidenced by the following.

1. no kidding! — an exclamation of amazement or used in an ironic way in response to an obvious statement.

2. no kidding (or I kid you not) — used to emphasize the truth of a statement.

3. no kidding? — used to ask if a statement is really true.

best of both worlds

If you have the best of both worlds, you are in a situation where you have all the advantages of two different things, without any of the problems or disadvantages. We would now call it "a win-win situation."

The expression became popular around the end of the 1800s and may have been derived from Voltaire's work, *Candide*, published in 1759. In it, Voltaire uses the phrase: "the best of all possible worlds."

eleventh hour

The "eleventh hour" means at the just-in-the-nick-of-time last minute, the latest possible time before the result of some often-dire event.

The phrase became popular in the 19th century, but was used earlier than that. It's possible that it arose from the same words appearing in the bible, but no one has been able to trace it back that far.

it is what it is

"It is what it is" is used to describe circumstances that must be accepted or dealt with and which can't be changed. It may express acceptance or resignation in a difficult situation, recognizing that some things are beyond our control.

Although the phrase may arise from Shakespeare's work, some claim it appeared more recently. It was used in 1949 by J.E. Lawrence in one of his articles: "New land is harsh, and vigorous, and sturdy. It scorns evidence of weakness. There is nothing of sham or hypocrisy in it. It is what it is, without apology."

you've never had it so good

This expression "you've never had it so good" was a 1950s political slogan used to try to persuade the electorate that their fortunes were best served by the party in power.

In Britain, it was made popular by Harold Macmillan, who was British Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, who obtained it from a US political slogan. In the speech he celebrated the success of Britain's post-war economy while at the same time urging wage restraint and warning against inflation.

Macmillan was mimicking the line of the US Democratic Party which used "You never had it so good" as a slogan in the 1952 US election campaign. That slogan may have been picked up from popular idiomatic usage in the US, as this piece from the US newspaper *The Sunday Morning Star*, September 1945 indicates:

"We used to have a little joke in the Army, when GIs were griping. 'What are you complaining about? You never had it so good in your life.'"

part and parcel

To be "part and parcel" of something is to be an integral or essential component of it. For example, "Travel is part and parcel of Catherine's job."

Used since the 15th century as a legal term, with part meaning "a portion" and parcel "something integral with a whole," this idiom began to be used more loosely from about 1800. Although both nouns have the same basic meaning, the redundancy lends emphasis.

virgin territory

"Virgin territory" is something that is completely new to you. For example, "This new computer system is virgin territory to us all."

The original meaning of the phrase is land that has never been explored or developed. By extension, it now also means ideas or concepts or activities that have not yet been tried, explored or developed.

middle names

Why do so many of us have three (or more) names? Well, it's not so your mother has more names to yell at you when she wants you to help her weed the garden.

The practice dates back to ancient Rome. Many Romans had three names: a praenomen, which was a personal name; a nomen, which was a family name; and a cognomen, which indicated what branch of family you were from. The more names you had, the higher up the social ladder you were. Women only had two names, and slaves typically had one.

The modern Western tradition of giving a child more than one name most likely began in the Middle Ages when religion was a powerful influence. Parents began giving babies a personal first name and a saint's name for a middle name, followed by the surname.

In the 1700s, emulating the Romans, aristocrats started giving their children lavishly long names to indicate their place in society. Similarly, lengthy Spanish and Arabic names adopt paternal or maternal names from previous generations to trace the individual's family tree. In other cultures, like Chinese, there are traditionally no middle names.

In America, middle names inspired by saints began to be replaced by

nonreligious middle names, such as a maternal maiden name. By the time the Civil War began in 1861, middle names were given purely at the parents' discretion and often two or three middle names were used. After all, a name like Gerald Julius Oliver Jones carries a little more weight than plain old Gerry Jones.

By the advent of World War I in 1914, official enlistment forms became the first government documents to request applicants' middle names. Middle names were so much the norm that when computers became routinely used for US citizen documents, they were programmed to recognize three names. If a middle name wasn't entered, the program would automatically insert NMI, which was a military abbreviation for "no middle initial."

If you don't have a middle name or even an initial, you can invent one. Joanne Kathleen Rowling, better known as J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, adopted the middle name "Kathleen" as an adult. The two rhyming initials are more appealing to the ear than just the plain "J."

An unusual middle name is that of Jennifer 8. Lee, an American author. Lee was not given a middle name at birth so she chose "8" when she was a teenager, in a nod to her Chinese ancestry; in Chinese culture, the number eight symbolizes prosperity and good luck.

double-edged sword

Literally, a "double-edged" sword is a sword that has two sharpened edges. Figuratively, a double-edged sword refers to something that has both good and bad consequences. Wealth and fame can be a double-edged sword.

When you're wielding a double-edged sword, you have to be careful that you don't cut yourself when you're trying to swing it at an opponent.

The expression ultimately comes from the use of "two-edged sword" in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions of the Bible to mean something very sharp, like a weapon or piercing words.

painstaking

The word "painstaking" is a compound of pains and taking, though it often sounds as if it were made from pain and staking. A painstaking effort is one in which someone takes pains to do something right. The word is sometimes used to mean "arduous" or "difficult," almost as if it meant "painful," but this usage is widely considered to be a mistake.

"Painstaking" means being meticulous, conscientious, and extremely careful or precise about details. In contemporary usage, the pain implied by the word often seems to be shared by both the person who makes a painstaking effort and the person confronted with the fruits of that labor: "Gertrude's ability to appear politely interested was tested as her dinner companion related his painstaking attempts to establish himself as the true heir to the British throne."

superstition

A superstition is any blindly accepted notion maintained despite lack of evidence. The first known use of the word in English was in the 1200s. Some synonyms are: illusion, fallacy, hallucination, myth, legend, old wives' tale, and magical thinking.

The term "superstition" derives from the Latin *superstitionem*, "prophecy, soothsaying, dread of the supernatural, excessive fear of the gods, religious belief based on fear or ignorance and incompatible with truth or reason." It commonly describes beliefs and practices surrounding, for example, luck, amulets, astrology, fortune telling, and spirits.

Many superstitions stem from the same human trait that causes us to believe in monsters and ghosts: When our brains can't explain something, we make stuff up. Superstitious beliefs originated during our earliest days, when we needed to explain to one another how the mysterious, frightening world worked. We had no science, then, to explain earthquakes, thunderstorms, flooding, illness, lunar and solar eclipses, and many other events, so we made up demons, spirits, and magic.

Then, one day, a Neanderthal waved his hand just as the lightning quit. Everybody thought he'd killed the lightning and thus shamans were invented. As time went on, superstitions became more and more traditional, and shamans became more powerful, giving rise to an assortment of religions.

In *The World Until Yesterday*, Jared Diamond says, "When people have done everything realistically within their power about danger or uncertainty, they are likely to resort to prayers, rituals, ceremonies, donations to the gods, consulting oracles and shamans, reading omens, observing taboos, and performing magic. All are scientifically ineffective at producing the desired result. However, by convincing ourselves that we are still doing something, aren't helpless, and haven't given up, we at least feel in charge, less anxious, and able to go on to make our best effort."

Exploitation of the religiously gullible by self-proclaimed healers and gurus

was a very ancient concern in China, reflected in centuries of government anti-religious rhetoric. (Obviously the issue is still with us today.)

Often, superstitions are born from coincidence. For example, if an athlete performs particularly well on the day he wears a particular pair of socks, he may continue to wear the same pair of socks in the belief that the socks were responsible for his success. It is possible that the simple belief in success or failure can influence the outcome. The athlete who cannot find his "lucky socks" may, due to lack of confidence, perform poorly, further reinforcing the belief in the power of the socks. Objects are often viewed as lucky charms.

There are endless myths concerning jewelry, for example. Ancient civilizations viewed jewelry as a source of power and protection, as well as for ornamental purposes. It was worn to ward off evil spirits, cure illnesses, or attract good luck and success. In some cultures, evil eye jewelry (featuring a blue eye symbol, sometimes called a "nazar") is worn when babies are born. This symbol wards off the malicious evil eyes of admirers casting ill intentions on the newborn child. The eye offers protection and good luck, too.

Numbers are often given power. In western cultures, the fear of "unlucky" number 13 causes some buildings to go directly from the 12th floor to the 14th floor. Many superstitions tell you not to do things or you'll suffer bad luck. For example, walking under a ladder is considered unlucky, unless you cross your fingers while doing it. Some beliefs are related to certain occupations. And sometimes, these have their roots in common sense. Actors are cautioned not to whistle in the theater. Backstage workers in theaters used to whistle to communicate with one another as they raised and lowered scenery and lights; the whistling of an actor could inadvertently cause a scene change or injury.

Studies in psychology have indicated that rituals can reduce stress and thereby improve performance. But there is no real magic. Any old ritual will do.

During the Middle Ages, trials by ordeal were quite frequent, even though Frederick II (1194 – 1250 AD) was the first king who explicitly outlawed trials by ordeal because they were irrational. The idea was similar to the ancient Romans who tortured slaves to make them tell the truth.

Billions of people are superstitious. A quarter of the adults in the US consider themselves to be so, and recent trends reveal that younger people are more superstitious than older adults. In fact, 70% of US students rely on good luck charms for better academic performance.

Oddly, people can realize that their belief is wrong but still act on it. Sometimes superstitions offer a host of benefits. They may have a soothing effect, relieving anxiety about the unknown and giving people a sense of

control over their lives. This is important because there's so much about our lives and society that we can't change.

Repeated behaviors may signal a more severe condition, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Many researchers suggest that superstition and OCD do not share a continuum, pointing out that superstitions and OCD use different brain areas. Still, OCD and superstitions share many overlapping traits, such as performing rituals to ward off harm.

People easily mistake pseudoscience for science and accept as true such things as parapsychology, homeopathy, existence of souls, the foundations of "intelligent design," the power of prayer, reincarnation, and astral projections. Many of these beliefs are manipulated for political ends.

On the other hand, sometimes we pretend that superstitious belief is a kind of play, a little joke, such as tossing coins in fountains, birthday cake candle wishes, and "lucky exam shirts."

Astrologists may be consulted by very eminent and cultured people, but it is not a very open practice owing to the more general disbelief in it by sophisticated society. Related are gypsy fortune-tellers at fairs and daily, weekly or monthly horoscopes which are widespread in journals. Superstition is an industry.

Writer Edwin Kagin says, "The universe doesn't care what you believe, is indifferent to what you want, and is unaffected by what you think. None of your feelings, aspirations, or actions are of any consequence. Still, humans invent religions and philosophies to convince themselves that what is isn't, and that they, at least, are special, exempt, and certainly important to the universe. The greater the attempt to deny facts, the greater the misery of those who try to keep the river from flowing."

Understanding the true cause of phenomena is the deepest desire of human beings, and understanding science is the answer.

bunkum

"Bunkum" is empty or insincere talk, claptrap, or nonsense.

People say "That's bunkum!" when something is false, crazy, or unfair. Getting fired for no reason is bunkum. A string of clichés from a politician is bunkum. An obvious lie is bunkum. This word especially applies to exaggerations and falsehoods. Someone who spins tall tales likes to talk bunkum, which is also called bunk.

You could almost say it was an act of the US Congress that brought the word into being. Back in 1820, Felix Walker, who represented North Carolina's Buncombe County in the US House of Representatives, was determined that his voice be heard on his constituents' behalf, even though the matter up for debate was irrelevant to Walker's district and he had little of substance to contribute. To the exasperation of his colleagues, Walker insisted on delivering a long and wearisome "speech for Buncombe." His persistent—if insignificant—harangue made buncombe (later respelled bunkum) a synonym for meaningless political claptrap and came later to refer to any kind of nonsense.

debunk

To "debunk" is to expose or ridicule false, sham, or exaggerated claims. For example, "The scientist debunked a supposed miracle drug."

To debunk something is to take the bunk out of it—the bunk being "nonsense." (Bunk is short for bunkum. *See above.*) Debunk has been in use since at least the 1920s, and it suggests that something is not merely untrue but is also a sham—a trick meant to deceive. One can simply disprove a myth, but if it is debunked, the implication is that the myth was a grossly exaggerated or foolish claim.

have one's ears pinned back

To "have your ears pinned back" means you have been scolded severely. For example, "The principal pinned back Ken's ears for the way he acted in class."

The phrase can also mean to be roundly defeated. For example, "I didn't think that team would pin back our ears so badly."

Finally, to "have one's ears pinned back" can mean being beaten. For example, "Don't cross George or he'll pin your ears back. I've seen him do it to others."

all over hell's half acre

"All over hell's half acre" is an American idiom, meaning all over the place or in all directions. It's often used when someone is rushing from one place to another or in relation to someone searching here, there and everywhere.

The phrase appears to have arisen from the name of a couple of red-light districts. The *Adams Sentinel* newspaper, May 1835, described a fire in Augusta, Georgia which destroyed an area called "Hell's Half Acre," apparently given that name because it was the town's red-light district.

The second "Hell's Half Acre" was a precinct of Fort Worth, Texas, designated as a red-light district beginning in the early to mid 1870s in the Old Wild West.

The half-acre block developed as a rest stop on the cattle trails from Texas through Kansas. It quickly became populated with saloons, brothels, and other vice dens offering gambling, liquor, and prostitutes. The Chisholm Trail and Texas and Pacific Railway were branded as the economic driving forces leading to the development of the red-light district.

Hell's Half Acre became a hide-out for thieves and violent criminals. It saw such Old West personalities as Bat Masterson, Butch Cassidy, Doc Holliday, Etta Place, Luke Short, Sam Bass, Sundance Kid, and Wyatt Earp. This led to crackdowns by law enforcement though they rarely interfered with the gambling and other vice operations in the area. The Acre was an important source of income for the town, and despite outside pressures against the illegal activities, Fort Worth officials were reluctant to take action.

However, in 1889, following serious bouts of violence in the city, officials shut down many of the activities that were deemed as most directly contributing to the violence.

Several wild and desolate geographical locations have been named Hell's Half Acre.

two steps forward and one step back

"Two steps forward and one step back" means a period of progress followed by a setback. You can say "one step forward and two back" to indicate stronger setbacks. The phrase may have come from a European folktale about a frog trying to jump out of a well which makes some progress, only to fall deeper into the well.

ships that pass in the night

This metaphoric expression comes from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *The Theologian's Tale* (published in *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 1873). It refers to people who meet once and form a close bond, but never meet again.

Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,
Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.

25 – Weirdos

taradiddle

A "taradiddle" is a fib, fabrication, or whopper. It also means pretentious nonsense, silly talk or writing, and balderdash.

The true origin of taradiddle is unknown. Some folks try to connect it to the verb diddle (meaning "to swindle or cheat"), but that connection hasn't been proven. No one even knows when taradiddle was first used. All we know is that it showed up in a 1796 dictionary of colloquial speech.

The English language is rich in synonyms for both the meanings of taradiddle. Additional ways of saying "nonsense" include trumpery, skimble-skamble, apple sauce, poppycock, baloney, tommyrot, twaddle, and fairy tale.

billingsgate

"Billingsgate" means coarsely abusive, foul-mouthed language. For example, "Due to the billingsgate coming from the mouth of the disrespectful student to his teacher, the boy was suspended for a few days."

From its beginnings during the time of the Roman occupation, the Billingsgate fish market in London, England, has been notorious for the crude language that has resounded through its stalls. In fact, the fish merchants of Billingsgate were so famous for their swearing centuries ago that their feats of vulgar language were recorded in 1577 by British chronicler Raphael Holinshed.

Billingsgate was once the name of an actual gate, belonging to a man called Billing, and was probably a gap in the Roman river wall. In the Middle Ages the wharf at Billingsgate was a principal unloading point for fish, salt, and other cargoes. Parliament made it an open fish market in 1698, from which time the gentlemen of the Fishmongers Company, their boots silvered with scales, exercised their functions there, maintaining it as London's principal fish market.

In 1982, Billingsgate Fish Market was relocated to its present location close to Canary Wharf in east London.

snickersnee

As a verb, "snickersnee" means to engage in cut-and-thrust fighting with knives. As a noun, it means simply a large knife.

Snickersnee comes from the Dutch phrase *steken of snijden*, "to thrust or cut." Over time, snick and snee, snick-or-snee, and snickersnee followed. The word has been in English use since at least the middle of the 1600s.

We usually come across the word now in the lyrics of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *The Mikado*. But it was fairly common in Victorian Britain, and appeared several times in works by William Makepeace Thackeray. Lewis Carroll, too, may have had it in mind when he wrote *Jabberwocky*.

widdershins

"Widdershins" is defined as the opposite of the usual, or in a left-handed or contrary direction, as in counterclockwise. Literally, it means to take a course opposite the apparent motion of the sun viewed from the Northern Hemisphere. Because the sun played a highly important role in older religions, to go against its direction was considered bad luck.

By the mid-1500s, English speakers had adopted widdershins to specifically describe movement opposite to the apparent clockwise direction. The word originates from the Old High German *widar*, meaning "back" or "against," and *sinnen*, meaning "to travel."

Dorothy Sayers refers to the expression in her novels *The Nine Tailors*: "He turned to his right, knowing that it is unlucky to walk about a church widdershins …" and *Clouds of Witness*: "True, O King, and as this isn't a church, there's no harm in going round it widdershins."

conjubilant

"Conjubilant" is an archaic verb meaning to shout or rejoice together with joy.

The word comes from the Latin *conjubilare*, which is itself from *jubilare*, meaning "to shout for joy." The prefix *con-* often has the meaning of "with" or "together." This is illustrated by such words as confabulate ("to talk familiarly together"), and constult, a word that is unfortunately quite obsolete but defined in The Oxford English Dictionary as "to play the fool together."

katzenjammer

"Katzenjammer" is defined as a hangover or severe headache, confusion, uproar, or distress. For example, "Traffic was all tied up, the kids were fighting, and in the midst of all this katzenjammer, the phone rang."

Apparently, some hungover German speakers once heard a cat wailing and felt they could relate. Katzenjammer comes from German *katze* (meaning "cat") and *jammer* (meaning "distress" or "misery"). English speakers borrowed the word for their hangovers in the first half of the 1800s and eventually applied it to outer commotion as well. The word isn't popular in English today, but it's well-known to many because of *The Katzenjammer Kids,* a long-running comic strip which began in 1897 and featured the incorrigibly mischievous twins Hans and Fritz.

Katzenjammer has also been used as a name for several bands and songs, a fictional character in the British sitcom *Black Books*, a piano musical comedy duo, and a paleontological site.

slantindicular

"Slantindicular" means somewhat oblique, slanting rather than perpendicular or horizontal, and was coined in the 1840s.

Slantindicular is a portmanteau, which may refer to a large suitcase, or to a word that is formed by blending two or more distinct forms. One of the better-known portmanteaus is smog, which is a blend of smoke and fog. Slantindicular, which is not one of the better-known portmanteaus, is a blend of slanting and perpendicular.

jimberjawed

"Jimberjawed" is defined as having a projecting lower jaw.

Jimberjawed is thought to be a variant of gimbal-jawed, which means much the same thing. A gimbal is a device that allows a suspended body to incline freely in any direction.

This word should not be confused with cold-jawed (obstinate), flap-jawed (talking excessively or indiscreetly), iron-jawed (rigorously determined), or slack-jawed (having the lower jaw dropped, indicating amazement or stupidity). And it should never, ever be confused with wapper-jawed (having

a crooked, undershot, or wry jaw).

As a sidelight, it wasn't until after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 that the letter "J" first began to appear in English words. Scribes borrowed it from French in the early Middle Ages as a replacement for the initial *dzh* sound, found in words like judge and jump. Even today, J is much more likely to be found in the initial position than it is anywhere else in a word.

hurkle-durkle

"Hurkle-durkle" means to lounge around in bed long after you should have got up. Hurkle-durkle is an old dialect term—in this case, from eighteenth century Scotland.

bogart

To "bogart" something is to selfishly or greedily appropriate or keep something, originally and especially a marijuana cigarette. It can also mean, according to one site, to take a very long inhalation of smoke (particularly marijuana) or to intimidate.

The term probably from Humphrey Bogart, an American film actor who was noted for playing tough cigarette-smoking characters. And there you get the combination of smoking and intimidating toughness.

tergiversate

"Tergiverate," which is a hard word to say first thing in the morning, means to avoid giving a clear answer, to evade, to hedge, to change sides.

26 – Fiscality

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "fiscal" derives from the Latin noun *fiscus*, meaning "basket" or "treasury." In ancient Rome, fiscus was the term for the treasury controlled by the emperor, where the money was literally stored in baskets and was collected primarily in the form of revenue from the provinces. Fiscus also gave us English confiscate, which is most familiar as a verb meaning "to seize by or as if by authority," but it can additionally refer to the forfeiting of private property to public use. Today, we often encounter fiscal in "fiscal year," a 12-month accounting period not necessarily coinciding with the calendar year.

I thought that "fiscal" would sound better with more syllables, so I made up the word "fiscality." But I discovered that the word already exists and *Merriam-Webster* defines it as "excessive regard for financial considerations."

Synonyms for fiscal include dollars-and-cents, financial, and monetary. I'll include precious metals and gems, as well, because they can be regarded as an investment.

golden handcuffs

"Golden handcuffs" is the name given to financial incentives paid to employees to discourage them from leaving a company. Employers offer incentives in order to retain individuals that have performed well for the company or those that have exceptional or irreplaceable skills.

Golden handcuffs are the opposite of golden parachutes. Such "handcuffs" are frequently used for jobs that require rare and specialized skills. Though very expensive, they are usually cheaper than the cost to replace a particular employee.

phony as a three-dollar bill

This American phrase means that something is completely and obviously false, fake, or illegitimate; not genuine or authentic in the slightest. There has never been a three-dollar bill in circulation in the US.

bet the farm

To "bet the farm" means to risk everything that one owns on a bet, investment, or enterprise. "I'd bet the farm on it" is something said to show confidence in an anticipated outcome.

I could find nothing about the source of the phrase but it must have arisen at a time when a farm was the main asset belonging to anyone who had assets.

cash cow

A "cash cow" is a business, investment, or product that provides a steady income or profit.

Anything from selling handmade earrings at a craft fair to inventing a new kind of technology can be a cash cow, as long as it makes a lot of money. There are different opinions about where the phrase came from originally. One theory connects it to the tradition of devout Hindus offering money to temple gods resembling cows, while another likens the flow of money from a cash cow to the flow of milk from an actual cow.

clutch one's pearls

To "clutch one's pearls" is to react with shock or dismay, especially in response to something considered immoral, underhanded or vulgar. And especially when you wish to show more shock than you really feel.

This phrase arises from the stereotype of a conservative woman who wears pearls and is easily offended. It dates back to the 18th century, when women wore pearls as a symbol of wealth and elegance. In those times, pearls were a status symbol, and only the wealthy could afford to own them.

drop a dime

To "drop a dime" means to snitch or inform on someone to a person of higher authority. Originally street slang for informing to police, it refers to the old price of using a public payphone (10 cents).

Life was simple in those days. Now we're stuck with cell phones.

for a song

"For a song" means almost free or, at least, very cheap.

The expression is believed to come from the 16th century habit of giving pennies to itinerant singers performing outside inns and public houses, as well as the very small amount required to buy sheet music. Shakespeare used it in *All's Well That Ends Well*: "I know a man … sold a goodly manor for a song."

king's ransom

A "king's ransom" simply means an unspecified but large sum of money.

In the early Middle Ages, however, it referred to the actual sum needed to obtain the freedom of a king who was held prisoner. In medieval warfare each participant had a price on his or her head and kings were the wealthiest and provided the greatest bounty.

Historians have shown that there was a well-organized trade in the captives of war and the capturing of high-ranking prisoners led to a significant bonus in the income of the capturing forces. Records show that an English archer called William Callowe obtained almost £100 from the ransom of an important prisoner taken at the battle of Agincourt in 1415. Callowes' usual wages as an archer would have been sixpence a day.

Richard I of England was captured by the Duke of Austria in 1192 and a price of 100,000 pounds in silver was paid for his release.

have no business

If you say that someone "has no business" to be in a place or to do something, you mean that they have no legitimate reason, experience, or authority to be there or to do something. For example, "I told my house cleaner she had no business tidying my desk drawers."

The word "business" dates back to before 950 BCE. In the 1300s, it was used to mean a person's trade, the occupation that allowed him to earn a living. In the 1700s, the meaning was expanded to include, "matters that occupy one's time."

have no truck with

To "have no truck with" means to avoid, to reject or to have nothing to do with.

"Truck" came into Middle English as "truke" from the early French word *troque* for "barter." Originally, if you had no truck with somebody, you refused to trade with him or her. By extension it came to mean you refused to have anything to do with the person.

So, to 'have truck with' was to barter or do business with. From the 17th century, the meaning of 'truck' was extended to include having association and/or communication with someone. 'Trucking' was also country slang for courting or dallying with someone. To 'have no more truck with' meant that a courtship had ended.

In the 1800s, 'truck' began to be heard only in the negative. For example, the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1834, said, "Theoretically an officer should have no truck with thieves."

In practice, too.

The original 'barter' meaning of truck extended to include the sundry items that were bartered. The stores that were set up to service the needs of itinerant navvies while they were building the UK's canals and railways were known as 'truck stores' or 'tommy shops.'

The construction sites were often far from towns and were the only places that the workmen could shop. The shops were generally ruinously expensive and provided poor quality goods. The workers were often paid in vouchers that could only be 'trucked' at the workplace shop. That all ended in the UK with the passing of the 1887 Truck Act, which made the worst excesses of the truck trade illegal.

In the USA such shops were known as 'company stores' and are the subject of the well-known American song *Sixteen Tons*:

> You load sixteen tons, what do you get?
> Another day older and deeper in debt.
> Saint Peter, don't you call me, 'cause I can't go;
> I owe my soul to the company store.

have your work cut out for you

"Having your work cut out for you" means having a lengthy or difficult task.

The most plausible theory explaining the source of the phrase is that it originated in the 1500s when the work referred to was the sewing together of fabric pieces which had been cut out for you by someone else.

The earliest use of the phrase so far seen in print is a 1591 piece, entitled *A discovery of the great subtiltie and wonderful wisedome of the Italians*:

"…here is more worke cut out in this one Chapter, then [than] they and their disciples will euer be able to do…"

The reference there to 'work cut out' makes no mention of tailoring. That's the case in many of the early printed uses of the phrase. 'Work cut out' for someone just seems to have been synonymous with 'work provided' for them.

In more recent years, the advent of power-cutters which can cut out hundreds of layers of fabric in one go, make 'having your work cut out' especially appropriate for sewing factory workers.

As time elapsed, however, the general meaning of the phrase shifted. Whereas it first meant that you were at an advantage, the 1800s introduced a new interpretation: the task at hand was an overbearing and strenuous one. Essentially, it started to mean the opposite of what it originally implied.

put a spoke in someone's wheel

If you "put a spoke in someone's wheel," you deliberately do something which spoils their plans. Cartwheels used to be made of solid wood, with holes in them through which a wooden bar or 'spoke' could be pushed in order to make the cart slow down or stop.

A primitive brake pedal, I guess.

steal a march

To "steal a march" is to do something before someone else and so gain an advantage over them. This expression comes from medieval warfare, where a march was the distance an army could travel in a day. By quietly marching at night, a force could surprise and overtake the enemy at daybreak. Its figurative use dates from the second half of the 1700s.

queer the pitch

To "queer the pitch" is a UK expression which means to ruin, spoil, or undermine someone's efforts, plans, or ideas. Originally, it meant to interfere with or spoil the business of a tradesman or showman.

'Queer' has been used as a verb meaning 'to spoil' since the early 1800s. The word 'pitch' can mean an area of ground marked out for some sporting purpose, such as a cricket pitch or football pitch. But it also means a position in a street market where a trader sets his barrow or stall. When street markets were common, directing the public away from rival traders' businesses towards one's own was an important part of capturing buyers. It could mean having a better display, or better patter, or just shouting louder.

Later, the term was used by theatrical people to mean "upstaging," to refer to an actor doing something that stole the scene from others.

steal someone's thunder

To "steal someone's thunder" is to use someone else's ideas, inventions, or creations for one's own advantage, or to pre-empt them.

In a contentious situation, such as a court case, a political debate or a public relations crisis, it is a tactic used to weaken the force of an adverse point. By introducing the point first and being open about it or rebutting it, the force of the opposition's argument is diminished — their thunder is stolen.

The idiom comes from the English dramatist John Dennis. In 1704, he had invented a new method of creating the sound of thunder and used it in his play *Appius and Virginia*. The play was unsuccessful. Shortly afterwards, the thunder method was used in a performance of *Macbeth*. Dennis was not pleased and said "Damn them! They will not let my play run, but they steal my thunder."

The terms used in theater, one of the oldest forms of expression, has had an impact on everyday language. Thespis, an ancient Greek, gave us the word 'thespian.' 'Background' originally described the part of the stage farthest from the audience, before it was applied to things outside of the theater. 'Scenario' originally denoted the front of a classical theater, and most surprisingly, the word 'explode' originated as a term for the sound made by audiences who clapped or booed a bad performer off the stage.

We still talk about being 'in the limelight,' a legacy from the days when theaters were lit by a white light produced by heating lime in an oxyhydrogen flame. This light was shone on the actors, so they were literally 'in the limelight.'

Devices that produce the sound of thunder have been called on in theatrical productions for centuries. The methods used include: rolling metal balls down troughs, grinding lead shot in bowls, and shaking sheets of thin metal. The

latter device, called a thunder sheet, is still in use today.

the thin edge of the wedge

If you say that some event is the thin end of the wedge, you mean that it appears to be an unimportant action but is actually the start of a major development, often an undesirable one. This expression alludes to the pointed metal wedge inserted into a log for splitting wood or the wedge shoved under a door to keep it from opening or closing. The expression began to be used figuratively in the 1800s. Anthony Trollope used it several times in *Dr. Thorne* (1858), and it was commonplace by the end of the century.

go south

If you say something may "go south," you're saying that it may vanish, drop in value, depreciate, or fall apart and cease functioning. "This toaster's gone south."

The expression is often used in the world of finance. It is generally thought to allude to compasses and two-dimensional maps where north is up and south is down. However, among some Native Americans, the term was a euphemism for dying, and possibly this sense led to the present usage.

quick bites

in the pocket — under someone's control or influence, usually for money.
two a penny (US "a dime a dozen") — very cheap or common

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young gun

###

Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?
The Wordy Ram
Wild & Woolly Words

Books Edited by Lea Tassie

Charger the Soldier
Charger the Weapon
Charger the God
The Missing Year
The Case of the Copycat Killer

Books by Lea Tassie and Leanne Taylor

Medieval Mosaic I
Medieval Mosaic II

About This Book

Wild & Woolly Words is the fourth in a series of books about weird and interesting words in the English language. The first three were titled *Baa Baa, Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?, Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail,* and *The Wordy Ram*.

It's not that I'm obsessed with sheep but I fell in love with the image of the silly sheep on the cover of the first book and then found more that I liked. As a cat lover, I could have looked for cat images but cats look silly so rarely that I didn't have a hope.

There are plenty of words and phrases about animals and birds, as well as guns, emotions, bags, wild winds, clothes, water, food, and so on. You can learn how to stack the deck, pull a fast one, and play with fire. Then, of course, there are the oddballs and weirdos like "Katy, bar the door!" and "hurkle durkle." All of this diving down the rabbit hole, I hope, will make you conjubilant.

Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.